THE HUNT FOR TUPAC'S KILLER

BALENCIAGA'S FIRE STARTER

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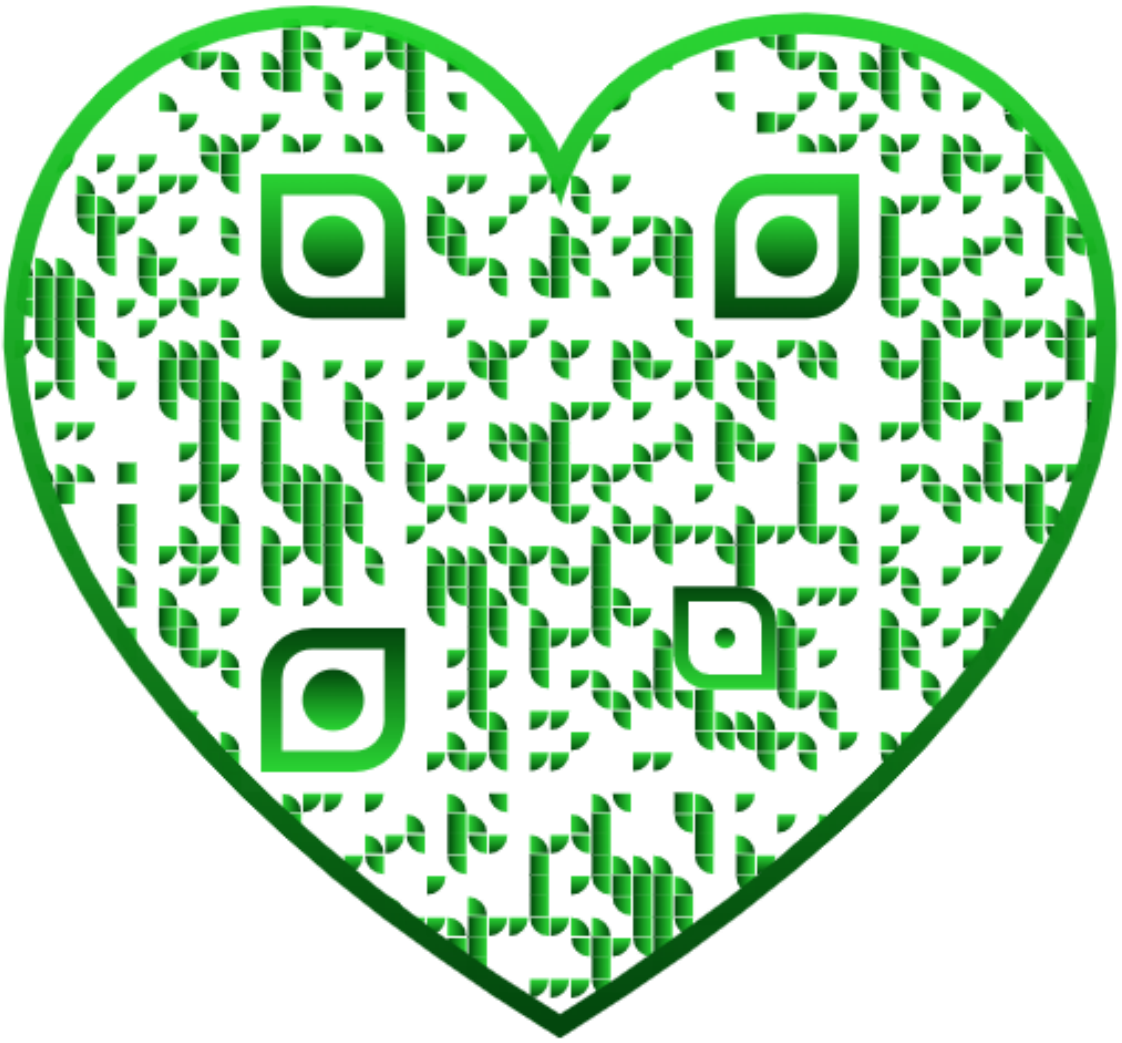
Rolling Stone

FEBRUARY 2024
ISSUE 1384

DUA LIPA

IS GIVING US EVERYTHING



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PHOTOGRAPH BY **Danny Clinch**

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Dua Lipa photographed in Los Angeles on Oct. 23, 2023, by **Michael Bailey-Gates**.

Produced by Rhianna Rule for Palm Productions. Photography direction by Emma Reeves. Styling by Lorenzo Posocco. Hair by Peter Lux at the Wall Group. Makeup by Nina Park for Kalpana. Tailoring by Diana Aghajanyan. Location: Smashbox Studios.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: CHIABELLA JAMES/PARAMOUNT PICTURES; CHERIL SANCHEZ; FRANK LEBON; BOBBI RICH

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Dua Lipa at her cover shoot in L.A.

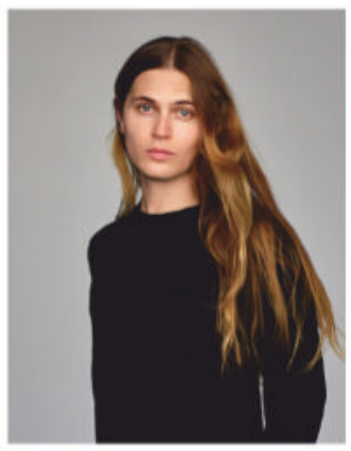
COVER STORY

Slowing Down Time With a Pop Star

Brittany Spanos

Senior Writer

Back in 2016, senior writer Brittany Spanos interviewed a 21-year-old singer from the U.K. who had yet to release a debut LP. That singer's name? Dua Lipa. Seven years later, as she spoke to Lipa again, for the February cover story (p. 32), Spanos recognized a grown-up pop star full of dazzling confidence. Getting the chance to interview Lipa both before and after she achieved superstardom "is really special," says Spanos, who has covered pop music for *Rolling Stone* since 2015. In those years, she's written about many of pop's biggest names, including cover stories on Harry Styles, Miley Cyrus, and Lizzo. She currently teaches a popular music course on Taylor Swift at New York University.



Michael Bailey-Gates

Photographer

Photographer Michael Bailey-Gates' secret to capturing a memorable image of a star like Dua Lipa is finding a way to make time stop. "All of these huge people that have come through the world were on the cover of [*Rolling Stone*], and they all had to stop and stand still with the photographer," he says. On this issue's cover, Lipa looks over her bare shoulder with a smoldering eye, evoking the timeless quality Bailey-Gates was looking for. A protégé of Ryan McGinley, Bailey-Gates has had work published in *Vogue* and *The New York Times*. His dream whenever he picks up the camera, he says, is simple: creating "souvenirs to bring into the future."

The Fashion Icon Behind the Controversies

Tanima Mehrotra

Photographer

Tanima Mehrotra only had 15 minutes to disarm Balenciaga's notoriously camera-shy creative director Demna and get a great portrait (p. 52). "My aim is to evoke a sense of intimacy," Mehrotra says. She's also brought that approach to shoots with musicians including Megan Thee Stallion, Lil Nas X, and Doechii.

Nathan Taylor Pemberton

Contributor

For journalist Nathan Taylor Pemberton, Demna is "the most unpredictable creative person on the planet." That's led to plenty of drama over the years — and it also makes him a perfect subject for a writer who focuses on the cutting edge of culture and the people who "drive, comment on, and reframe it."

Reporting From the Belly of the MAGA Beast

Crosbie (right) with photographer Colin Freeman in Ukraine

Jack Crosbie

Contributor

Jack Crosbie has reported from some dicey locales, from the front lines in Ukraine to "Cop City" in Georgia, since becoming a *Rolling Stone* correspondent in 2019. For this issue, Crosbie went inside the New York Young Republicans Club (p. 28) — a group he describes as being at "the nexus of the very hardcore MAGA movement." The right-wing operatives he found there, he says, may play key roles "on the national political stage for many years to come."

UPDATE

Four RS Reporters Win Awards

In December, *Rolling Stone*'s EJ Dickson, Angie Martoccio, Alex Morris, and Cheyenne Roundtree were honored with Front Page Awards from the Newswomen's Club of New York, which celebrates "journalistic excellence among women." The awards they earned in the magazine and online categories recognized investigative bombshells and revealing profiles published in 2023. All four have more to come in 2024.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: MAC SHOOP; COURTESY OF TANIMA MEHROTRA; KIM CHANG STUDIO; COURTESY OF MICHAEL BAILEY-GATES; CHRIS BLACK; JACK LOSH

Opening Act

A Room That's 'Filled With the Good Ghosts'

LEVON HELM STUDIOS are a second home for Allison Russell: In past phases of her career, the singer-songwriter has spent quite a bit of time performing or hanging out at the late Band drummer's legendary former house and performance space in Woodstock, New York. But this past fall, Russell headlined the barn as a solo artist for the first time. "When I talk about circle work, Levon Helm's studio is a prime example of that," says Russell, who performed songs from her Grammy-nominated LP *The Returner* and duetted with Helm's daughter, Amy, on "Atlantic City." "These spaces, the ones that are filled with the good ghosts, are the sacred spaces of live music." JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

Russell practices before the show at Levon Helm's former home in Woodstock.

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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

Madi Diaz Tells It Like It Is

Nashville's secret weapon (and Harry Styles' bandmate) levels up with an LP full of folk-pop gold

→

PHOTOGRAPHS BY Cheril Sanchez

MADI DIAZ

MAD ABOUT MADI Diaz visiting New York in October

AT THIS POINT in her career, Madi Diaz is realistic about life on the road. "I'm 37 years old, and this shit is heavy," the Nashville songwriter says with a laugh. "I'm walking through the airport and I'm carrying a lot of pedals and cables. I'm shoving my guitar in the bathroom stall." By the time she gets to the check-in counter, she's dreading the task of talking an airline employee into letting her bring her gear on board. "I'm just not a good fighter," she adds. "I'm stubborn, but I don't have the *oomph* in me anymore."

Maybe that's true when it comes to luggage, but it's definitely not applicable to Diaz's music. Just ask Harry Styles, who brought her out as an opening act for his Love on Tour shows in 2022 – and liked her so much he asked her to join his backing band. Other fans of her incredibly relatable folk pop include Angel Olsen, Muna, and Waxahatchee (all of whom collaborated with her on re-recordings of her excellent 2021 LP, *History of a Feeling*), and Kesha, who recorded a song she worked on in 2019. By all accounts, having the *oomph* is Diaz's thing.

It's an unseasonably toasty afternoon in October, and Diaz is sitting in the lobby of Manhattan's Ace Hotel, wearing a tank top under a button-down blouse. She says she's utterly sleep-deprived (she looks alert) and that her bangs look like Edward Scissorhands attacked them (they look lovely). "You can tell how well I'm doing in my actual life based on how many fucking horoscope podcasts and apps I have on my phone," she jokes. "If I have more than two, it's not good."

The night before, Diaz played the Beacon Theatre, opening for My Morning Jacket. Performing at the ornate, 94-year-old venue was a bit overwhelming. "It's so romantic, I got lost," she says. "I started trying to talk between songs, and a word literally came out backwards. I was staring at this golden-lady statue. We're playing the fucking Beacon with these insane horns. I just cannot believe my ears."

When she says "insane horns," by the way, she's referring to Styles' touring horn section: saxophonist Lorren Chiodo, trombonist Kalia Vandever, and trumpeter Laura Bibbs. "They're the sweetest, best women," Diaz says. "It was like a summer-camp reunion."

One of the songs Diaz performed with the horn section is "Same Risk," a brutally honest acoustic scorcher from her new album, *Weird Faith*: "Do you think this could ruin your life?/'Cause I can see it ruining mine."

"I had just started to date my former partner and I was freaking out," Diaz explains. "You can't control anything. All I can do is just simply keep walking forward. It's become my own mantra."

She extends this concept to "Everything Almost," another highlight, about giving nearly all of yourself in a relationship – while keeping a small portion just for you. Hearing it, you can tell why Diaz calls the track a "straight-up journal entry." With dense details packed into sharp lines, it's a future fan favorite they'll eventually know every word to: "I had a dream there was a baby inside of me/One hand on my belly and the other one pointing/Ordering you around the house like a bitch/And you just laughing and taking it."

"Madi has a really pleasing way of keeping everything conversational," her friend Kacey Musgraves tells ROLLING STONE. "My favorite kind of songwriting." The Nashville musicians have known each other for a long time, but became close in the pandemic – cooking, shopping for antiques, and joking about sharing a house together. "Madi and I will hit the occasional estate sale or go for a long walk and chat," Musgraves says. "There's also wine. And horses. We're both horse girls through and through."

Musgraves appears on the *Weird Faith* duet "Don't Do Me Good," a dazzling send-off to a lover with a potent chorus about finally throwing in the towel. "There's something about her voice that just lifts the whole thing," Diaz says. "I know Kacey's speaking voice pretty exclusively, so it was fun to be in the studio and put the headphones on and then listen to that voice coming out of her mouth: 'Oh, right! That's my friend!' "

Co-written with Ed Sheeran collaborator Amy Wadge, "Don't Do Me Good" is easily one of the strongest songs in Diaz's catalog. But she was hesitant to ask Musgraves to sing on it. "I was totally terrified to ask her, because that bridge feels comfortable for me and my friendship with, like, Courtney Marie Andrews," Diaz says, naming an Americana peer. "But Kacey is in a completely different stratosphere. She's a pop star." (Hearing this quote, Musgraves laughs: "That's ridiculous. We're friends. I was like, 'Absolutely. Duh. Yes.' ")

Many of Diaz's friends these days are female musicians – something that wasn't always the case for her. "With our generation, alpha females were taught to avoid each other in our twenties," Diaz says. "Which is such a goddamn shame. It's funny how that completely shifted in my thirties."

Diaz grew up in Norwalk, Connecticut, and moved to Pennsylvania when she was seven; later, she studied at Berklee College of Music before dropping out to play gigs at the Bitter End in New York. She moved to Nashville in 2008, grinding it out as a songwriter, then moved to Los Angeles to play in bands, finally returning to Nashville in 2017.

"I did not literally think for two seconds about being a woman in the industry and how that would maybe, eventually, become difficult," she says, thinking back to her early career. "It's fucking different for women, and hopefully people will respect that at some point. I honestly don't think that men do."

Diaz names several musicians who tour with their children, from Maren Morris to Elle King to Margo Price ("a fucking badass"). But despite that line about parenthood in "Everything Almost," she knows it's not her time yet. She's learning to live in the present, citing Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl's 1946 memoir, *Man's Search for Meaning,* as a recent inspiration.

"It's about listening to what life is asking of you and responding to those questions," she says. "And, like, life isn't asking me to be a mother. Right now, it's asking me to fucking carry my guitar two miles from LaGuardia Airport, and have a rat's nest of cables in my carry-on bag that weighs 50 pounds. So I'm trying to be there." **ANGIE MARTOCCIO**

FAST FACTS

WRITING RETREAT
Diaz estimates that she wrote "well over 150" songs when she was stuck at home at the height of the pandemic.

SONGBIRD
Diaz can be heard singing background vocals on Miranda Lambert's 2016 album, *The Weight of These Wings*.

FATHER OF INVENTION
Music runs in the family: Diaz's dad plays in a Frank Zappa tribute band.

BACK IN TIME
She's been getting back into *Mad Men* ("a really solid rewatch").

HAIR BY DANIEL LUTZ USING R+CO PRODUCTS. MAKEUP BY ABBY BERNI USING DIOR BEAUTY AND HOURGLASS COSMETICS. PREVIOUS PAGE: DRESS BY STAUD. THIS PAGE: TOP IS DIAZ'S OWN. JEANS BY LEVI'S. BOOTS VINTAGE. PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY ELVIS TOWERS.

ART

Swizz Beatz and Alicia Keys' Museum Moves

IN GALLERY CIRCLES, Swizz Beatz (a.k.a. Kasseem Dean) and Alicia Keys are as well-known for their discerning taste in contemporary visual art as for their decades-long catalogs of pop, rap, and R&B hits. The public can see some of their vast collection this year at the Brooklyn Museum's "Giants" exhibit, which highlights more than 100 Black artists. Every piece was handpicked by curator Kimberli Gant to go with a theme suggested by the two stars: "For them, the artists themselves are giants," she says, in the way they use individual lenses to examine society. In 2016, the power couple started the No Commission art fair, with 100 percent of sales going to artists – an initiative Gant calls "radical." She adds that she hopes "Giants" will make people realize "there's art for everyone at any price point." ANDRE GEE

▶ HARD CANDY

This 2016 installation by Ebony G. Patterson places beads, fabric, rhinestones, and other colorful items against a pink backdrop. At first glance, it's a joyous ode to youth, but a closer look reveals holes that symbolize the violence faced by many in Patterson's native Jamaica. Gant says the piece aims to captivate viewers yet ask a pressing question: "I was so enthralled — but wait, 'Did these children grow up? What happened to them?' "

▲ A VISION OF BEAUTY

Deborah Roberts used found photographs and acrylic paint to make this 2018 collage, titled "The Visionary." The final image celebrates the variance and beauty of Blackness in one person. "She's really thinking about the fact that so many Black people are [told that] the physiognomy of Black people is not considered beautiful," Gant says. "It doesn't matter what parts you have. You are beautiful."

◀ INVISIBLE MAN

Chicago-based visual artist Nick Cave began crafting his "Soundsuit" series in the early Nineties in response to the LAPD's beating of Rodney King. Gant sees these works as a commentary on identity: "If I can have them not see me as a Black man ... because they're seeing something else, would that protect me?" By obscuring the wearer, she adds, "it brings up conversations about how we see people in the world."

◀ WHEELS OF STEEL

The name "Giants" isn't just figurative: Many pieces in the show, like Arthur Jafa's eight-foot-tall "Big Wheel I," are physically huge. With its elaborate pattern of chains wrapped around a wheel, Gant says, this work evokes both monster trucks and slavery. "There's a lot of legacy about physical violence against people, especially Black people," she adds. "It's not direct, but it also [references] that legacy of bodies in chains being controlled, and having a master."

▲ ABSTRACT POWER

This acrylic work by noted South African artist Esther Mahlangu is part of the 88-year-old painter's "Ndebele Abstract" series, which draws on the artistic traditions she learned as part of the Ndebele people. "All these artists are dealing with such complex issues within their work," Gant says. "Everything is layer upon layer. And I just wanted to emphasize that because there's so much — each one is such a beautiful, complex amalgamation of ideas and information and material."

ALL WORKS: THE DEAN COLLECTION, COURTESY OF SWIZZ BEATZ AND ALICIA KEYS. FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: © DEBORAH ROBERTS; © "EBONY" G. PATTERSON/MONIQUE MELOCHE GALLERY; © NICK CAVE/JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY; © ARTHUR JAFA/GLADSTONE GALLERY; © ESTHER MAHLANGU

ARTIST YOU NEED TO KNOW

Daymé Arocena Finds a New Voice

BY THE MID-2010S, Daymé Arocena was a household name in her native Havana. When she'd walk down the street, people would stop her, recognizing the singer with the powerful, heart-atomizing voice. "I came from the jazz scene, and I'd built a reputation there," she remembers. "But I started to feel like I'd hit a ceiling."

Arocena had always been an outspoken voice in Cuba's arts scene, but around 2019, she says, her world changed after she had a few public clashes with the government's cultural ministers. Fearing repercussions, she moved to Canada. Then the pandemic hit. "It put me in a complete state of isolation," she says, recalling how alone she felt in a new country. (She now lives in Puerto Rico.)

One night, Arocena caught Beyoncé's *Black Is King,* a film that revolutionized her perspective: "I didn't know there was a way to mix folk culture and pop." That helped inspire *Alkemi,* a gorgeous reinvention of Arocena's sound that blends tradition and modernity. It's also a proud celebration of Blackness, of spirituality, and of the self. "This is me, using every tool at my fingertips," she says.

JULYSSA LOPEZ

PRODUCTION BY PAOLA ALEXANDRA VICARIA. HAIR BY CAVERLINA CULTURE. STYLING BY MARIA GARCIA LEYVA.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Rose Marie Cromwell**

Bringing Bob Marley to Life

The director, stars, and Marley family discuss the making of the new biopic 'One Love'

By DAVID BROWNE

FILMING A SCENE as the title mystic in *Bob Marley: One Love,* Kingsley Ben-Adir was striding across a room in Jamaica when he heard, "Cut!" Marley's son Ziggy, who was on set, had some input: He told the actor that his father wouldn't have walked that particular way. "He was going up the stairs," Marley says, "and I tell him, 'Listen! When Bob walks, he takes *two* steps at a time.' "

Months later, in New York, Ben-Adir re-creates the revised move, his knees almost coming up to his chin. "Everyone was doing an example of how Bob would do it," he says. "I had to stay open to that and be like, 'This stuff is helping me. It's helping me find him.' I had to stay fluid with that."

Since Bob Marley's death 43 years ago, his family has turned his legend into a highly monetized estate, selling everything from weed to headphones. The only thing missing was a biopic – which, according to Ziggy, had been broached in the past, but perhaps too soon for him and his family. "As human beings in our maturity," he says, "I don't think we were at the level yet to take this on." But starting in 2018, the family decided to take the reins. "They were bringing something to us, and in this case, we brought something to the studio," he says. "That is the big difference."

In theaters Feb. 14, *Bob Marley: One Love* is an unconventional biopic in ways that might startle or please his fans. Start with its focusing on a specific period in Marley's life: from the attempt to end it in 1976 through his two-year exile in London, the making of his *Exodus* album, and his return to Jamaica in 1978 for a concert that helped ease political tensions in his home country. "I don't think anybody was interested in doing a cradle-to-grave story," says director Reinaldo Marcus Green (*Monsters and Men, King Richard*). "We felt like that window of time encapsulated a lot of Bob's life. There was a lot going on: political turmoil in Jamaica, a war, the assassination attempt. Bob was at the center of it. He wasn't a global superstar, but *Exodus* put him on the map. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

Ben-Adir jams out as Marley. Below: Green directs Lynch's Rita Marley.

"Political turmoil in Jamaica, a war, an assassination attempt," the director says. "Bob was at the center of it."

When he was first approached about the role, Ben-Adir, who is British, admits he thought he was the wrong man for the task. "I was thinking practically," says Ben-Adir, who is 6'2". "He's 5'7". I'm a baritone and can't sing, and I don't play the guitar. Having one white parent and one Black parent is what we have in common." But after he learned that Green would be directing and that Marley's family was aboard, Ben-Adir signed on – then underwent months of training to transform himself into Marley as much as possible.

With the help of never-before-seen interview footage supplied by the family, the actor studied and transcribed Marley's particular patois to avoid making any obvious mistakes. "I'll convince everyone in the States that it's OK, but Jamaicans will know," he says. "They will know every single fucking word." During the music performances, we're mostly hearing Marley's voice, but Ben-Adir took vocal and guitar lessons so he could still sing along, even if we're ultimately only hearing his own singing voice in a few scenes, like a re-creation of the jam session that led to "Exodus." "You do not want my concert singing in this film," Ben-Adir admits. "I mean, I butchered a lot of people's ears for hours and hours." Green even called Rami Malek to ask how he inhabited Freddie Mercury in *Bohemian Rhapsody* in a similar way. "He said, 'I belted out everything in that movie, and he should go for it – he should do everything, and you'll find the right balance,' " Green recalls.

Ziggy Marley says he was ultimately satisfied with Ben-Adir's work re-creating his father. "He captured a deepness that is really human and is really touching," he says. "He touches on funny things, too. He did that very well. Not in a mimicking way, not in a cheesy way. There are some scenes that might be closer than others, but overall, he did it artfully. He's interpreting Bob, not being Bob. Nobody can ever be Bob. This is an artist representing this painting."

The soundtrack involved sonic tweaking of its own. The movie re-creates two pivotal concerts during those years – 1976's Smile Jamaica show and 1978's One Love Peace Concert. In what may be a controversial move, Marley's son Stephen, who served as the film's music supervisor, hired newer Jamaican musicians to rerecord the backing tracks on songs from the two shows. (One of those musicians is Aston Barrett Jr., son of the original Wailers bass player and leader of the current version of the Wailers.) "It's a long time [ago]," Stephen says of the concert tapes. "So you have to go in and touch up some of the music to make it sound good in the theater."

With Ziggy serving as its most hands-on producer in Jamaica and London, *One Love* involved a greater level of scrutiny than most biopics. Neville Garrick, the Tuff Gong art director and Marley confidant who died this past November, was also an adviser. "We bring the culture and authenticity to it," says Ziggy. "We lived it."

As Ben-Adir learned during his walking scene, cast members were regularly corrected on the types of clothing or hats they would wear. "There were small things like, 'She wouldn't wear a shirt like that, or 'Where's the bangle she always wears?' " says Lashana Lynch, cast as Rita Marley, Bob's wife and protector. "The bangle was really dear to her, and I realized I hadn't had it on in one of the scenes and thought, 'Gosh, we have to make sure we have this in every scene.' Every day was something new."

FROM TOP: CHIABELLA JAMES/PARAMOUNT PICTURES, 2; GIJSBERT HANEKROOT/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

SKIP THE MEAL PREP SCARIES WITH STOUFFER'S SIDES.

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SOUL REVOLUTION
Producer Ziggy Marley, Bob's real-life son, looks on during the filming of *Bob Marley: One Love*.

REBEL MUSIC
Ben-Adir's Marley with (from left) Aston Barrett Jr., Sheldon Shepherd, and James Norton

During a scene in which Bob is seen disembarking a plane and stepping into a limo, Green was told they had it wrong. "It was, 'No, Bob would never sit in the back seat and be driven by somebody,' " says the director. "His brethren are his equal. If there's a seat in front, he's going to sit next to him." In her own headset during filming, Sevana, the Jamaican singer and actress cast as I Threes member Judy Mowatt, would be told when she wasn't sounding enough like Mowatt. Lynch says they all rolled with it. "I personally invited the guidance because I just thought, 'If this was my parents and two strangers came in trying to emulate them, I would want to police everything to protect my parents,' " she says. "I don't have a legendary family. They do."

To make himself more closely resemble the shorter, more sinewy Marley, Ben-Adir had some mild prosthetics added to his nose. According to Ziggy, his mother signed off on the project, although she did occasionally point out something she felt wasn't quite right. "She might say, 'Oh, he doesn't look like Bob,' " Ziggy says, with a laugh. "She was complaining like that, about his look in one shot. She knows Bob, you know. But she trusts me, too."

Lynch had her own concerns going into the project. "With her being a wife and a mother, there's danger of Mrs. Marley being reduced to just those two roles in her life," says Lynch, who is British and of Jamaican descent. "And she was so much more and represents so much, and so much to Bob. I was just determined to have her be what she needed to in the film."

That sense of protectiveness emerged during one of the movie's most dramatic and pivotal scenes: an argument between Marley and Rita in which the latter expresses her frustration over her husband's fame going to his dreadlocked head. "It was months and months and months in the making," says Ben-Adir of that scene, which only lasts a few minutes. "That scene got redrafted and redrafted," he explains. "That was a deep discussion between Lashana and me and Ziggy and the family. There are lines in that scene that are so deeply personal to the family. It was a decision for them to make, how much they wanted to share." Green adds: "I would be very protective if I was making a movie about my father too. But Ziggy's protection was to tell the truth. Rita *would* get angry and she *would* slap Bob. For us to see that is great. Ziggy wasn't saying, 'Let's pretend that didn't happen.' "

Of that and the rest of the movie, Ziggy Marley says he is ultimately at peace: "You have to tell the truth in this truncated time period. It's the life truth, and we're telling it." The lessons learned were evident months later, when cast and crew reassembled in London for a reshoot and Marley watched as Ben-Adir emerged from a subway stop. "He remembered, one year later, to take two steps," Marley says approvingly. "Which, you know, is good." ®

Burnin' and Licensin': Marley Inc.

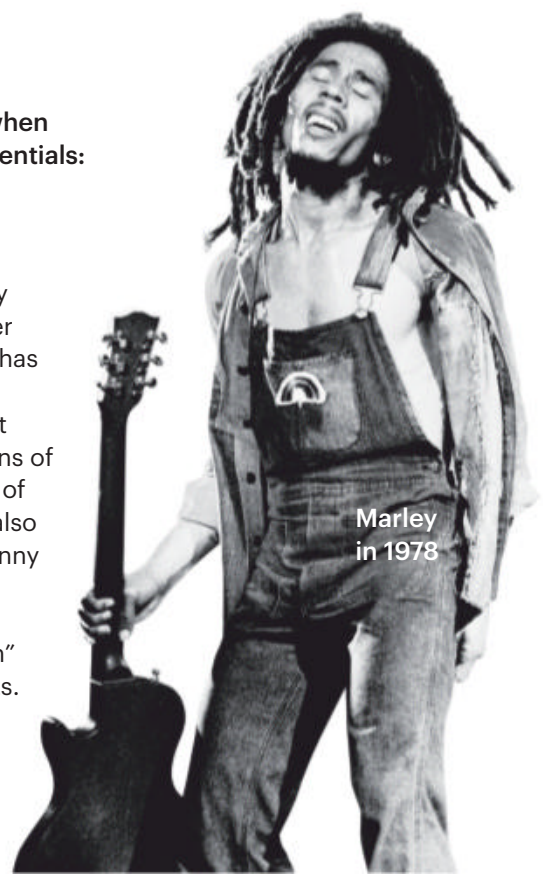
By the mid-2000s, the business of Bob was stagnant, but that changed when his kids began attaching his name and likeness to products. Here, the essentials:

Food
It started with Marley Coffee, then spread to cook-at-home Marley Kitchen. Now, there's Bob Marley — One Love restaurant at Jamaica's Sangster Airport, and Marley Beverage sells teas, ice coffees, and sodas.

Weed
Marley Natural, founded in 2014, sells everything from water pipes to grinders. The Marley Museum has a dispensary, and in Michigan, you can buy Lion Order, official Marley weed. Did we mention the Marley One shrooms?

Tech
Naturally, you'll need official House of Marley products to listen to his music. Choices include bookshelf and Bluetooth speakers, turntables, wireless earbuds, and charging cables, most made with recycled products.

Clothing
An extensive line of Marley merch — over 120 items — has something for just about everyone: tons of Bob T-shirts, of course, but also tote bags, fanny packs, baby onesies, and "Redemption" jogging pants.



Marley in 1978

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PROFILE

Zelda Williams' Dark Sense of Humor

Following the death of her dad, Williams found herself in the director's chair for 'Lisa Frankenstein'

By ANGIE MARTOCCIO

ZELDA WILLIAMS has wonderful memories of being on film sets as a kid, watching her father, Robin Williams, shoot movies like *Hook* and *Bicentennial Man*. But that doesn't mean she inherited his bombastic sense of humor. "I'm a bit darker," says Williams, 34. "I'm the person who laughed during *Hereditary*."

Williams is putting those dark impulses on full display in her feature directorial debut, *Lisa Frankenstein*, in theaters Feb. 9. Written by Diablo Cody, the film is an Eighties retelling of the Mary Shelley classic (think less chemistry experiments, more Echo and the Bunnymen). It follows a high school outcast (Kathryn Newton), who recently witnessed her mom get killed by an ax murderer. When she's not pissing off her evil new stepmom (Carla Gugino), she accidentally brings a hot Victorian corpse (Cole Sprouse) back from the dead. Normal stuff.

Speaking to Williams on a Zoom call in late December, it's immediately clear that she has an encyclopedic knowledge of horror films, and several of them influenced her zom-com: *Day of the Dead, Death Becomes Her, Edward Scissorhands,* and others. "I miss movies that felt more like *Beetlejuice,* where it had an enormous amount of unhinged, unobstructed creative and colorful wildness to it," Williams says. "Now, people expect them to be so polished and speedily edited. I went, 'OK, what if we put that aside and tried to make a genuinely Eighties movie?' And weirdly, no one stopped me."

"She definitely committed to that vision," says Cody, who also wrote the 2009 horror comedy *Jennifer's Body* and won an Oscar for *Juno*. "I said, 'I've never seen more fiber-optic decorations anywhere, including during my actual Eighties childhood, but I'm here for it.' "

Cody, 45, had always wanted to write a "dead-boyfriend movie," and the pandemic provided her the opportunity. For her, *Lisa Frankenstein* is the female response to the 1985 John Hughes film *Weird Science* (Lisa is the name of the dream woman Anthony Michael Hall and Ilan Mitchell-Smith create on a computer). "I grew up watching those build-a-bitch movies," she says. "I always thought, 'Where's the version where a girl is creating the ideal male?' "

Williams was given the script by Cody's boyfriend, who had seen Williams' 2018 short film *Shrimp,* about dominatrixes in an L.A. dungeon, and thought they'd be a good match. He just didn't tell Williams who she was. "Completely buried the lede, didn't tell me his girlfriend was Diablo," Williams says. "I got back to him and was like, 'Please connect us.' I tried to do whatever song and dance they needed, because I really fell in love with this."

Despite being raised in the world of comedy, Williams finds it scarier than horror. "It's certainly something that I see people be far more critical of, and that really terrified me," she says. "Comedy is the hardest thing you can do in entertainment by a long shot. It takes an enormous amount of confidence and empathy to even make your loved ones laugh, let alone strangers."

Williams grew up in San Francisco and began acting in minor roles as a child, making her film debut in 1995's *Nine Months* as a ballet dancer. She appeared with her dad in the 2004 David Duchovny film *House of D,* and even auditioned for the role of Juno's friend in Cody's 2007 film. But Robin's death in 2014 halted her acting career.

"I started transitioning toward wanting to direct and wanting to leave behind acting around when Dad died," she says. "Being behind the camera became a much less self-conscious place than being in front of it. For some people, I reminded them of him and it made them sad. Or I was just never going to live up to him and it made them angry, or they didn't believe I should be there. In either case, none of those things are about me. They shouldn't concern me. But I'm human, and it was really tough."

Williams coped with her father's death by pouring herself into screenwriting. "At the time, I was afraid of being outside, of being around strangers," she says. "Writing was an outlet. It genuinely felt like it was the only thing anyone couldn't take away from me, because every other version of creation required someone else's permission. Writing doesn't."

"Being behind the camera became a less self-conscious place. I reminded some people of [my father], and it made them sad."

Williams debated going to school for directing, but sat in on classes and shadowed directors like her mentor Scott Derrickson (*Doctor Strange*) instead. In addition to *Shrimp,* she's directed music videos and worked on several indie projects that fell through during the pandemic. *Lisa Frankenstein* was the one that stuck. "The plan was not to have it be my first," she says. "But I'm very, very grateful that it was."

Williams pays homage to her father in the film, when Sprouse (known as the Creature) wears rainbow suspenders. She says she's watched some of his films since his death, but it's not something she necessarily seeks out. "Other people watch home movies," she says. "In my case, it's seeking out an unreal version of him, and sometimes I can handle that and sometimes I can't. But I don't really judge myself for it anymore."

The Creature's arrival drastically upends Lisa's life, and her walk on the wild side evolves from healthy coping mechanism to hilariously alarming (there's some murder, and a few surgical procedures made with a broken tanning bed). It's the perfect fusion of comedy and horror that proves Williams' career is only just beginning.

"I think my sense of humor was shaped by a lot of trauma," Williams says. "I find a lot of humor in darkness, and I want to make things lighter for other people. Aspects of that definitely carry over into this movie. We spend so much time trying to make the way we navigate anything more palatable for others, especially women. Lisa gets to do the opposite in this." R

HAIR BY NANCILEE SANTOS; MAKEUP BY KINDRA MANN

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Jessica Lehrman**

Q & A

Brittany Howard

On how the pandemic era made her 'get a life,' her new outlook on creativity, and her secret love of metal

By BRITTANY SPANOS

"THE ROUTE I'm taking to being a farmer is ridiculous," Brittany Howard says, sitting at the William Vale luxury hotel during her press trip to New York. She's fantasizing about a potential future, one where she would maybe own a farm like the one she grew up on. It's one of many ways she can see herself adding to the list of non-musical hobbies in her repertoire since 2020: fixing boats, fishing. But don't worry, music is still at the front of the former Alabama Shakes leader's mind at 35. She has a new solo album, *What Now,* due out Feb. 2. She started working on it in 2020 while isolating in a rental home in Nashville. It's a testament to newfound patience that translates into some of her most grounded and reflective music yet.

You wrote this album during a time when you were still waiting to tour your 2019 solo debut more widely. What was that like?
Honestly, I kind of put that to the side. I just wanted to stay alive. So much was going on in the world … Black Lives Matter, a tornado where I lived in Nashville, helping people pick the pieces back up. Everybody was worried about their job security. I was sad about that, but as time went on, I was like, "Oh, this is actually pretty nice to not be on the road." … I was like, "What do I want my life to look like?" It was like a tiny midlife crisis. In those three years, I grew up a lot.

Did that time make you rethink how you approached music?
I was renting a house, [so] I didn't have a studio. There was a tiny little-kid's room in the house and just a laptop. Very basic. I said, "I'm gonna go in here and record something I'm feeling every day. Just sit down and do it." I told myself it doesn't have to be good. That was new. I used to really torture myself.

How do you mean?
When [Alabama Shakes] did *Sound & Color,* I locked myself in the basement, and there was a bat in there. Super stressed, only working at night, sleeping all day, pounding coffee at, like, 2 a.m., 3 a.m., 4 a.m. I was like, "This is how you make good work."

What was that about? Were you superstitious?
I guess I thought that the looser I got mentally – the crazier I was – the less I would judge the work. Then I found out you could just *not* judge your work.

How was that mentality affecting your life outside of work?
There was almost no life outside of work. That was a problem.

Are you still seeking that balance?
I figured out the balance, for sure. This is a hard business. When you're a creative person, so much of your identity is wrapped up into what you're creating. There's no boundaries for that. You're like, "This is all of me." And that's all fine and good, but what if there's more to life? That was something I was visiting because it was taken away from all of us. It was scary. I had to get a life.

What does that life look like for you?
I'm slowing down and appreciating the people I have around me more. Nature, just small things. Even the sun coming through the window is something that can make me really happy. I used to think it was success and awards and money – all these things that we think will make us happy. But in those few years, I was just like, "Man, I'm grateful that the oxygen I breathe is clean. I'm glad I can breathe." There's no prize at the end for working yourself to death.

You've said that the through line of this album is heartbreak and analyzing your own romantic patterns. Can you say more about the patterns you were analyzing?
How do I say something without saying too much? [*Laughs.*] I think there was a pattern of withdrawal on my end. Because of the way I grew up mostly an only child, I got used to my company. Anybody in my space would feel like too much. Ultimately, that's not fun. It was something I analyzed, and I'd say fixed.

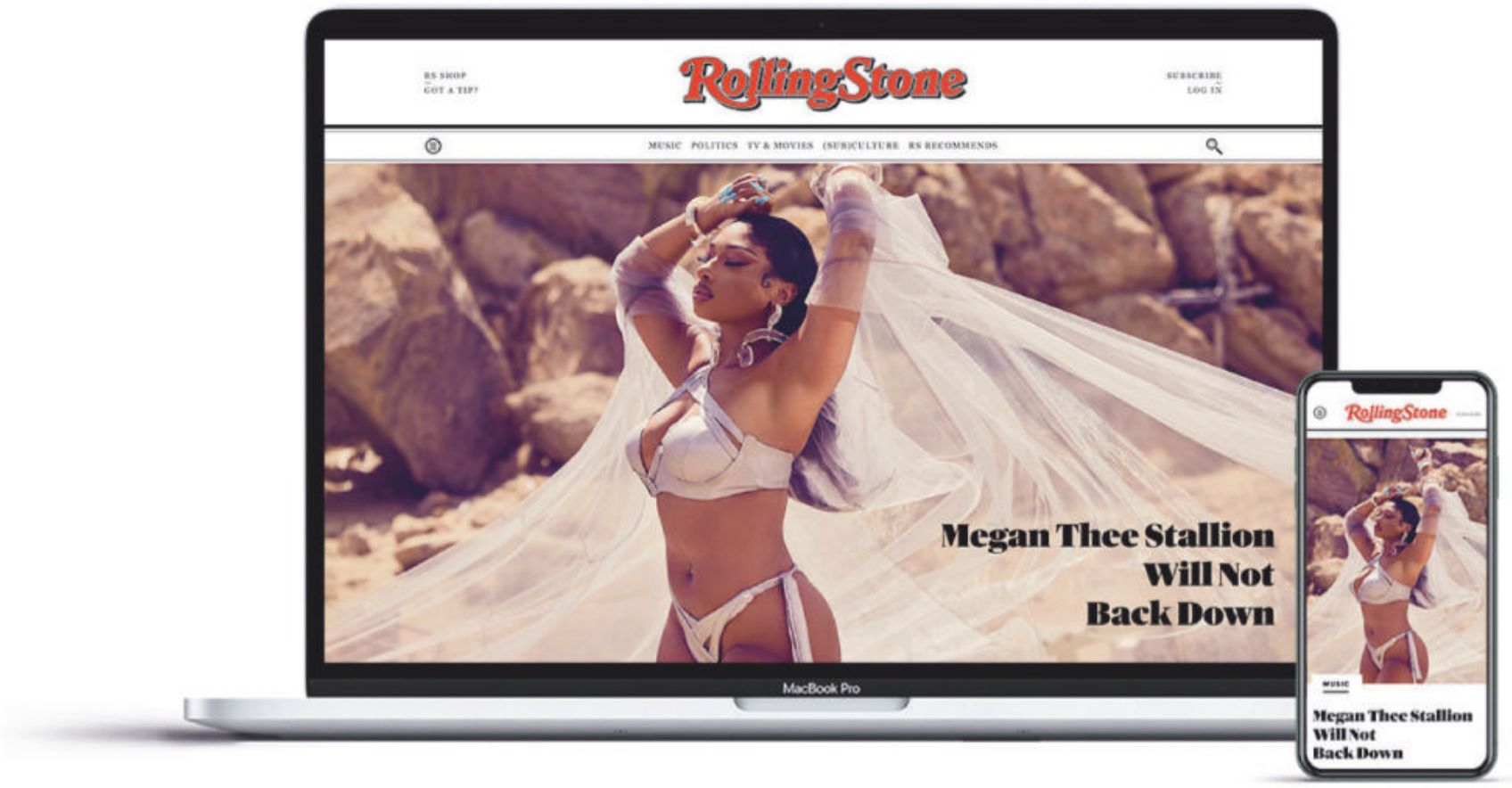
Have romantic relationships become easier since you figured that out?
I think that remains to be seen. I feel like I'm spending more time with myself, getting less enmeshed in a relationship – which I feel like a lot of us fall into. It's only natural that love feels good.

What about your friendships?
I definitely don't take things personally [anymore], and I ask my friends what they need from me – whereas before, I would just be trying to do what I would want. I guess I'm paying more attention.

You've been in a couple of bands, and now you have a couple of solo albums. What else are you interested in exploring in the future?
I just follow my creativity. It's really that simple. If I get bored doing the solo stuff on my own, I'll just do something else. But I'd like to get into metal next, probably. I've liked that since high school, but because the Shakes took off I never had a chance to get in there and do that.

What are some of the metal bands you like?
I liked American Nightmare, Lamb of God, Slipknot, Blood Brothers. People are gonna come for me in the comments: "That's not metal! Those are screamo artists, that's hardcore!" I just like loud rock music.

BOBBI RICH



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MULTIPLE SHOTS After a man was murdered in Virginia, the suspect ended up on the FBI's Most Wanted list.

The Insanity Plea That Shook a Small Town

A Marine killed a man, then went missing for weeks. His case raises questions about mental health and the criminal-justice system

By MOLLY LANGMUIR

THE MAN STOOD in the shadow of the trees facing the small tan house. He was tall and had the close-cropped military haircut of the Marine he'd been until deserting his post a few weeks earlier. A black mask covered his face, he wore a one-piece camouflage suit, and carried a .300-caliber blackout rifle and a .22-caliber handgun.

The surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains of Hardy, Virginia, flower with dogwoods in the spring; in the summer, the hills bloom so lushly they look covered in neon velvet. It was Nov. 9, 2019, though, and the trees were bare.

Rodney Brown, who owned the house, spent the previous evening eating pizza with Vanessa Hanson, the woman to whom, in all ways except officially, he was married. The next morning, Vanessa was watching a show called *Scare Tactics* when Rodney went outside to check her car's antifreeze.

This was the moment the masked man had been waiting for. He stepped out from the trees and shot Rodney multiple times from behind. Rodney ran toward the house but only made it to the door before the man caught up to him and shot him in the head with the handgun.

Inside, Vanessa heard a series of cracks and thought, for a moment, Rodney was playing a *Scare Tactics*-esque trick on her. Outside, though, she came across the kind of scene that splinters the mind: Rodney was slumped over as the masked man walked toward him holding a gun. As the world rushed back into motion, Vanessa ran inside to call her mother, Diane Hanson, who lived about a half hour away in the city of Roanoke. But when Diane picked up, something happened that investigators, at first, had a hard time making sense of – Vanessa didn't mention the crime at all, just said that she'd had a fight with Rodney and was going to have breakfast. Moments later, though, Vanessa called back crying, hung up, then started calling over and over. Diane got in her car to pick her up. When Diane called on her drive over, Vanessa was hysterical, yelling that Rodney was dead. Diane called 911. She arrived at the house before the authorities, so she called them

"THE ROANOKE TIMES"

again. This time Vanessa was in the background, screaming.

By then the man had disappeared into the landscape, like the last line of a riddle. Who he was, and his relationship to Vanessa, would soon become clear, but efforts to solve why he did what he did would lead to revelations so unsettling that some grasped for explanations that skirted with the supernatural. Even the man himself, during the three hours we spend on the phone last summer, struggles to comprehend what had happened. "I was doing things so outside my own character that I thought maybe I have another personality," he says. As for the event, he says he has no memory of it.

Being in a "disordered state of mind" – the Merriam-Webster definition of "insanity" – can seem like a prerequisite for certain types of violent crime. Indeed, about nine percent of the state-prison population have a psychotic disorder (according to a 2016 Department of Justice report). Insanity, though, is almost never used as a legal defense. "You hear about the high-profile cases, but it is very rare and often unsuccessful," says private-practice forensic psychiatrist Eugene Simopoulos, who in 2022 conducted an evaluation of the man who killed Rodney. According to the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors, as of 2014, only around 7,000 people found not guilty by reason of insanity were confined in psychiatric hospitals (by comparison, the U.S. prison population is more than 1.2 million). One often-cited study found that the insanity defense is submitted in just one percent of all felony cases, and only successful a quarter of the time it's used.

Most insanity defenses involve psychosis. But just one of the many unusual elements of what happened at that tan house was that it resulted in a court case with a rare insanity plea, an uncommon dissociative-amnesia diagnosis, and an incredibly unlikely result: The man won. The outcome pivoted on questions that led through murky terrain, namely how much we can know about what happens in another person's mind and who we think should be helped or punished. The man's defense also rested, implicitly, on the idea that a person can be not only a violent offender but also a victim deserving of support. To whom do we extend this grace? "Some see the insanity defense as a morality play," says Christopher Slobogin, a professor at Vanderbilt Law School. "As a way of allowing the community to express what they think about the crime and the criminal."

THE SEARCH FOR MICHAEL Rodney Brown (top) was shot and killed outside of his home (above). Michael Brown (left, with his mother, Vanessa) was the main suspect. Unbelievably, Michael says he hid out in a destroyed RV (below) as law enforcement searched it during a manhunt after he went on the run.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: WESTERN VIRGINIA WATER AUTHORITY; COURTESY OF VANESSA HANSON; FRANKLIN COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Before any of that, though, authorities were presented with a more urgent concern. Within days, investigators learned the suspect had explosives training, was a skilled sharpshooter, and was armed with a substantial arsenal, as well as, possibly, high-capacity weapons. But as the manhunt grew larger – it would draw in the Virginia State Police, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Naval Criminal Investigative Service, U.S. Marshals, FBI, local police, and the Franklin County Sheriff's Office – even as the man ended up on the FBI's Most Wanted list, no one could find him. He seemed to have vanished.

FRANKLIN COUNTY, where Hardy is located, was once known as the moonshine capital of the world – an often-repeated bit of local lore is that during Prohibition, nine out of 10 residents were involved in bootlegging, including the sheriff. It's rural and 90 percent white, with landscapes dotted with cows and silos; a popular yard sign is "Jesus is my savior, Trump is my president." Pretty much everyone in the county's roughly 700 square miles attends the same public high school, and many families have been rooted there for generations – one local described the area as "closed and clannish," a place where everyone knows everyone's business. Which was perhaps part of why what happened that November was so disturbing. It suggested that no one ever really knows anyone, that sometimes, we don't know ourselves.

The first deputy who arrived on the scene found Rodney's body warm but without a pulse. When he asked Vanessa to recount what had happened, she started to, and then "got off topic," the deputy wrote in the preliminary investigative report, though the relevance of what she did next would soon become clear – she showed him her wrist, covered in stitches and scars, and said she "recently hurt herself because she was worried about [her son]," who "had gone 'missing' from the Marines."

At the station, Vanessa and her mother, Diane, were interviewed by criminal investigator Holly Willoughby, who has blond hair, a soft drawl, and a straight-shooting sweetness only

slightly belied by the gun she carries on her right hip. Willoughby knew she wasn't getting the full story, but the family's circumstances were clearly complicated. Diane told Willoughby that Vanessa, who has two sons, spent eight years of their childhood in a mental hospital, and that Vanessa's relationship with Rodney was tumultuous; for the past year, Vanessa had been living mostly with Diane. "Rodney is, he was, a very impatient person with a short temper," Diane told Willoughby. "But he's not a bad person."

Diane's suspicions centered on her grandson, Michael Brown, a "disgruntled" Marine, as she described him, who "hates his father" and claimed Rodney abused him and his younger brother, Timothy. Diane, however, had her doubts – "Diane told me right off the rip, she saw the boys all the time and never saw marks or bruises," Willoughby says. Diane explained to Willoughby she'd encouraged Michael to cut Rodney some slack. "Maybe you deserved it," Diane would tell Michael. "Maybe he took it a little too far and whipped you a little too hard, but come on, maybe you asked for it."

As for Vanessa, she was "not cooperating with specific information," Willoughby wrote in the report. Later that week, though, Vanessa was far more forthcoming – after she ran outside, she said, she recognized her son Michael as the masked man. He then followed her, held a gun to her head, and directed what to say to Diane, speaking in a voice that didn't sound like him. But in other moments he was lucid, asking her to give him a three-hour head start.

Once a suspect was established, the investigation progressed rapidly. Authorities learned that Michael's last interaction with Rodney was when he was kicked out of the house at 17, and that even before Michael deserted the Marines, he was being investigated by the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) for stealing a skid steer, a small construction vehicle. A week after he was last seen on base, on Oct. 18, NCIS had searched the sailboat where he was believed to be living and found a note he'd signed. "Fuck this shit, society is trash and life is too," he wrote. "I'm getting out of here and going far away to start a new life. I'm not going to prison over the skid steer I stole. By the way (no surprise) I stole the skid steer."

Soon after, on Halloween, Michael showed up at Diane's – in a peculiar-sounding episode, he waited in Vanessa's closet, then once she came home

MAKING A CASE Michael Brown's attorney, Deborah Caldwell-Bono, argued in court that her client met the criteria for an insanity plea after an evaluation showed he had symptoms consistent with dissociative amnesia.

(Vanessa told the FBI), said his name was Wolf, that he was a professional killer working for the "Chamber," and that he'd have to hurt Rodney.

From Vanessa, investigators also learned the relevance of another preceding incident at Rodney's house – nine months earlier, Rodney had returned home and discovered it ransacked. Five safes containing at least seven firearms were stolen, along with a four-wheeler and other valuables. Vanessa told the FBI Michael had broken in, then gone back to base. One of the safes contained his birth certificate, which was how he learned Rodney was not, as he'd believed, his biological father.

Authorities still had no idea where Michael was, though, and the tension surrounding the investigation mounted with each passing day. Willoughby suspected Vanessa knew more than she was sharing. "But it ain't my place to judge," Willoughby says. "I just find out the truth, or as close as I can get to it. The rest is up to the judicial system. Sometimes it gets it wrong, and sometimes it don't."

AT FIRST, when a man had shown up in late-October 2019 to an RV park on the swampy end of Lake Marion, in Rimini, South Carolina, and asked if he could show his ID later, owner Alice Weathersbee didn't think much of it. "We don't have any kind of excitement down here, you know what I mean?" Weathersbee says.

She didn't know it was Michael, who'd just deserted his base. She just knew she found him odd. He always wore a red shirt and a black tie. And every day he opened up the trailer the RV was towing, pulled out a Lincoln town car, then parked it in the trailer at night. "Like he was hiding it," she says. "I'm beginning to think this guy is like a hitman or something," Weathersbee told her husband.

In early November, Weathersbee's husband and one of their sons were checking on their crawfish ponds when they came across "Dick Tracy," as they'd taken to calling Michael, lying on the ground using a tripod to sight a rifle toward a torso-silhouette target, three holes shot through the target's head. The next day, Michael took off in the Lincoln.

"That's when he went up there and killed his stepfather," Weathersbee says. "Afterward, he came back and watched movies in the campground like he'd done nothing."

In the early hours of Nov. 12, Weathersbee says, Michael took off again, this time for good. Back in Roanoke about 48 hours later, Diane was woken up by someone banging on her house – suspecting it was her grandson, she called the cops. "911 get in here!" she said frantically. "I think Michael Brown is here!" Law enforcement soon located Michael's beat-up RV in the parking lot of nearby St. Elizabeth's church. One of the St. Elizabeth's parishioners, Bobby Ballance, had noticed the RV the night before – lots of people had – during the church's weekly potluck. The next morning, when Ballance stopped by to make sure the dinner was cleaned up, he found the parking lot crawling with law enforcement and the RV destroyed – a tactical vehicle had ripped the side straight off. "I thought, 'What on God's green earth?' " he says. " 'That thing's torn all to pieces.' "

Authorities did not find Michael in the RV. But what they did discover put everyone even more on edge. On Michael's laptop, there was a piece of writing that began, "I am no longer Michael Brown, he had to be killed off to make way for the darkness." The murder, it continued, "was just part of a much larger scheme of things." The RV also contained nine guns, including the .300-caliber blackout rifle used to shoot Rodney, ammunition, an Army handbook on explosives and demolitions, "black powder," lock-picking tools, a chemical protective suit, and night-vision goggles.

"THE ROANOKE TIMES"

A.J. DUDLEY is now a judge, but during Michael's manhunt, he was Franklin County's commonwealth attorney. A tall man with a baby face, he is serious about the law, but not self-serious, with a healthy appreciation for banter.

Dudley had just won his reelection campaign and taken off on a long-promised vacation to Denver with his wife, Renee, when he got a call about the murder in Hardy. ("It's like his spirit leaves the county and someone has to go kill somebody," Renee says.) Later, Dudley noticed the title of the book he picked up on that trip, about a notorious 1911 Denver murder, had an odd resonance: *Murder at the Brown Palace*.

The setting of Rodney Brown's home – off a gravel road running alongside a creek – is bucolic, but the property had little in common with a palace. A single-story structure, it had a wood-paneled living room and two bedrooms crammed with everything from blank CDs to camo hats. In the yard, a few storage sheds held what someone who knew Rodney called his "man toys."

Rodney grew up there, raised by his grandmother after his mother died of yellow fever when he was a baby; numerous relatives still live nearby. (None responded to interview requests.) "It was almost like a family compound," says a woman whose daughter knew Michael (she asked not to be named). "Which is pretty typical out here." She remembers Michael as a bright, socially awkward child who did a lot for attention. While she gathered the boys' home life was not optimal – "They didn't get new Levis when the old Levis got too small," she says – she didn't think much of it. "Not having a mom at home," she says, "we could explain away the little things."

"I admired Rodney," says another woman who knew him, not least because he was raising Michael as his own (the woman, who also asked not to be named, thought it was common knowledge that Rodney wasn't Michael's birth father, though if so, the information never reached Michael). "He was quiet and he was country, but he was very responsible," she says.

That this was how he was perceived was why, after the murder, when rumors of abuse started to emerge, some dismissed them out of hand. Then on Nov. 25, a local TV channel revealed that, per 2006 court documents, Rodney was accused of child abuse and neglect.

By then, Michael was already well on his way to becoming, for some, a local folk hero. A Facebook group called Justice for Michael Brown soon had more than 1,000 members, who discussed reports and rumors about Michael, derided news coverage they believed made him sound overly dangerous, and expressed their enthusiasm for, say, a bumper sticker reading "#RUNMICHAELRUN."

Just before Thanksgiving, Michael's brother, Timothy, returned home from college and found food and a blanket in a crawl space at the house. Early on Nov. 27, snipers began a stakeout. Hours later, as a state-police SWAT team searched the residence, an officer spotted legs descending from an access panel in the ceiling of Rodney's bedroom closet. It was Michael, a small notebook in his pocket and a .22-caliber handgun tucked into his belt – if he couldn't keep the book, he told the officer, he would kill himself. "Fine, you can keep the book," the officer said; Michael gave up the gun. The manhunt ended exactly where it all began.

At the Franklin County Sheriff's Office, Michael met with Willoughby and another investigator, Steve McFarling, and told them he didn't want to talk about the events of Nov. 9. Other than that, though, he was happy to discuss just about anything at all. "How much time you got? Shit, I will tell you my whole life story," he said. During the next four hours, between apologizing for not smelling better ("Deodorant was not a priority") and offering tips for their next manhunt ("I'm a supporter of police"), Michael shared various formative experiences of his life. "I was thinking, 'I'm going to meet Chris Kyle,' " Willoughby says, referring to the Navy SEAL who inspired the film *American Sniper*. "But it was little Michael Brown, and he was so young and so friendly." As she left the room, she ran into Deborah Caldwell-Bono, the lawyer who'd recently agreed to represent Michael. "Your client sure is a likable guy," she told her.

CALDWELL-BONO HAS a gravelly voice, greets just about every woman with "Hey, girl," and drives a Jaguar with a vanity plate that reads "PRO BONO." She and Willoughby are friends (Willoughby's daughter-in-law is Caldwell-Bono's hairdresser), but she first heard about Michael's situation from Rodney's neighbor Patsy Murphy, who'd asked for her help encouraging Michael to surrender. Caldwell-Bono assumed Michael's apprehension would be the end of it (she'd taken on the job pro bono). "But the more I got to know him, the more I decided to see it through to the end," she says. Much of what she learned about Michael's past was horrifying, and some was baffling, but she came to have no doubt he was telling the truth.

When Michael was young, Vanessa was a Cub Scout leader and school volunteer. But she struggled with her own mental health and history of trauma. (After being sexually abused as a child, Vanessa was institutionalized for much of her teenage years; she has been given a number of diagnoses, including borderline personality disorder and PTSD.) When I talk to Michael on the phone last summer, he is matter-of-fact as he goes through the details of his childhood. Around five, he attacked Rodney with a butterfly net to stop him from choking Vanessa; in response, Rodney threw him across the room. Around eight, Michael and his brother went into foster care. (What prompted this is not clear – the court records are sealed, and while Vanessa remembers this occurred after she asked social services for help with the cocaine addiction she was struggling with, the leaked court documents about Rodney's child-abuse charges suggest these are what prompted the boys to be placed in foster care. The Department of Social Services denied access to these records even to Caldwell-Bono.) As Michael told forensic psychiatrist Simopoulos in an evaluation, "My mom was doing drugs, and my stepdad was abusive. It could be any combination of things."

"It doesn't matter too much how you formulate an insanity defense," says Christopher Slobogin, a professor at Vanderbilt Law School. "Juries are going to go with their gut reaction."

Not long after that, Vanessa pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity for felony possession of cocaine – she claims her lawyer told her she'd be out in a few months. (Her files are also sealed.) In Virginia, though, as in most states, acquittees can be held as long as they are deemed mentally ill and dangerous; she was kept for eight years. "It tore my family up," she says. "All the stuff I'd planned to do as a mom, gone."

Rodney fought to get the boys back from foster care. Once he did, about a year later, he brought them to Vanessa for monthly visits. Per Michael's account, the abuse also escalated. "I think my mom being in the hospital was the stress that was pushing him over the edge," Michael says. One winter, Rodney punished the boys by locking them outside barefoot for so long that they peed on each other's feet to stay warm. Michael estimates he lost consciousness at least 20 times from Rodney slamming his head into the wall. Timothy, who is in his early twenties, declined to speak with Caldwell-Bono (and didn't respond to me), but showed investigators holes in the wall of his and Michael's bedroom he said were caused by this. One was on top of a Spider-Man sticker, making for uncanny imagery – Spider-Man crouched on the wall with a hole at his center, as if a force rammed through him so violently it transmuted him from superhero into, instead, a void.

VANESSA DESCRIBES Michael as an affectionate child who could be a handful, like the time he brought a lizard onto a school bus. In elementary school, he was bullied. In high school, he joined the JROTC program; his dream was to become a Marine – he was always talking about "shooting bad guys," one friend of his, Sierra Bradley, recalls. He was also a class clown and an atheist who often wore a suit to school ("I always told him, 'Dress to impress,' " Vanessa says). Which made him something of an outlier at Franklin County High School.

Just after his graduation, Michael was walking to his room one night when Rodney said to him, "Why the fuck are you still here?" Per Michael and Vanessa, who'd just been released from the psychiatric facility, Rodney kicked Michael through the screen door. Michael walked barefoot to Bradley's house, but her parents called the cops, concerned about harboring a runaway (Michael was 17). Police brought him home, but he wouldn't return inside. "I was like, 'Fuck, hell no, I have a boot print [on my back],' " he told Willoughby and McFarling.

He spent the next several months homeless, sleeping in the janitor's closet of a nearby town park. Eventually, he got a job as a security guard and moved in with his girlfriend. His attempts to join the Marines were stymied by his medical [*Cont. on 77*]

National Affairs

Donald Trump's Hometown Shock Troops

A trio of upstarts flipped an old, crusty Republican club on its head – and the brand of politics they're espousing is dark, even by MAGA standards

By JACK CROSBIE

THE GRAND BALLROOM at Cipriani Wall Street is bathed in purple and red. There are red and white lights and blue curtains and a massive Christmas tree all underneath the glow of two jumbotrons. There's a bald man with a ruddy dome and a senator in a scarlet waistcoat. A pool of wine vomit appears in a bathroom sink in between the risotto course and the filet mignon.

I'm in the corner with the rest of the press, crammed up against a riser where photographers grumble because they cannot actually see shit and Donald Trump is about to take the stage to make what the program calls his "grand entrance" at the 111th annual gala for the New York Young Republicans Club, a $699-a-plate event co-hosted by a Hungarian far-right think tank. It feels like MAGA prom – men in black tie, women in sequin dresses.

I've been following the NYYRC for months to understand a shock-ready, gun-slinging contingent of far-right millennials and zoomers firmly embedded in one of the most cosmopolitan, progressive cities in the world. They think of themselves as warriors for the MAGA movement operating behind enemy lines, surrounded by lefties infected with the woke-mind virus that makes you put your pronouns in your bio and the woke Covid vaccine that makes you gay. Sorry, my mistake, that's a misinterpretation. "That's not how it works – if you took the vaccine you were already a homosexual!" says gala MC Alex Stein, a right-wing YouTuber who went viral for doing an anti-vaccine rap after his mother died from Covid-19. Stein is playing the hits because the MAGA elite are in the room. Florida Rep. Matt Gaetz is here. Steve Bannon, Rudy Giuliani, Lauren Boebert, Paul Gosar, and Jack Posobiec. On Bannon's podcast, Posobiec refers to the event as part of the "gathering of the Macedonians." As attendees arrive, stepping out of black cars and cabs on Wall Street, protesters shout: "Klan rally inside! White hoods complimentary at coat check!"

At the center of it all: NYYRC president Gavin Wax, a 30-year-old day trader who in his five years in office has grown the club from a few dozen to 1,100 members, jamming himself like a quick-talking crowbar into the internal machinations of New York City's conservative elite and, he claims, gaining the ear of the big man himself.

The dinner moves through courses and speakers: White-jacketed waiters carry overladen platters that threaten to slosh gravy onto jackets and dresses. Gaetz gets the crowd's attention with lines about the movement being "under siege" and touts his ouster of former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy; Sen. Roger Marshall falls flat as he drones through a boilerplate MAGA stump speech. Just after 10 p.m., the room stills as club president Wax takes the stage to introduce the man everyone is waiting for.

He gets it all in: Trump's fight against the globalists, the forever wars, D.C. corruption, the political persecution of the former president. And he professes his loyalty. "Under my leadership, the New York Young Republican Club will forever be a vanguard of the Trump movement in this city," Wax thunders. "We will be unrelenting in our pursuit of the America-first agenda, and together we will make America great once more! Now, ladies and gentlemen, get on your feet, and give a loud, warm New York welcome to our hometown hero!"

Wax's speech made one thing clear: If there are still any pundits or patsies holding out hope for a return to the mythical era of cordial conservatism that ruled Republican politics the last time the NYYRC had any sort of juice, they can give up now. The current incarnation of the club is all-out MAGA-minded, and the leadership is determined to make their group a talent incubator for prospective staffers of future far-right politicians long after Trump's sun has finally set. They're hardly kingmakers at the moment – the biggest political job one of the club's top dogs has held is a nebulous gig for George Santos, the

Writer JACK CROSBIE *reported on far-left gun clubs for the May issue of* ROLLING STONE.

THE NEW RIGHT
Gavin Wax (center) and other NYYRC leaders pose for TV cameras at the club's gala.

instantly-disgraced ex-congressman. But they are beginning to boast connections to dozens of boldface names in the MAGA movement, from controversial congressmen like Gaetz to shadowy advisers like Bannon, who have both spoken at past NYYRC events – and now, they've finally had a visit from the emperor himself. They've gotten here by running the Trump playbook: start fights, grab headlines, and make a whole lot of noise. But the brand of politics they're espousing is dark, even by Trumpist standards. Tilt your head one way, and guys like Wax are just tiny, squeaky wheels in a vast political machine. Tilt it the other, and they could very well be the GOP's amped-up, authoritarian-friendly future.

STICK WAX IN A POLICE LINEUP with 10 other 30-year-old day traders buzzing around midtown Manhattan, and you'd have trouble fingering him for a crime: neat haircut, close-cropped beard. He's a master of the practiced "Hey, how ya doin'?" handshake when working a room. It all adds up to a guy seemingly tailor-made for politics.

Wax grew up about a 10-minute drive from where Trump did in Queens – but his background is much different. Wax bounced between schools while his single mom worked office jobs; in high school, he sold weed and mushrooms to afford the fancy clothes his classmates wore. As an adult, the hustle didn't stop: Wax graduated from Nassau Community College and worked for a marketing firm, supplementing his salary with an import-export business hawking leather bags from Morocco and coffee. Wax dabbled in conservative politics before the 2016 election, but by the time Trump clinched the Republican nomination, Wax was a MAGA die-hard. In those days, New York had an underground but burgeoning alt-right scene centered around figures like British provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos, who hosted parties attended by operatives and online trolls alike. At one of these events, Wax met Nathan Berger, an entrepreneur a few years his senior who was also interested in local right-wing organizing. At another party, Berger and Wax met the third member of what would become the ruling trifecta of the NYYRC, Vish Burra, a Staten Island software account manager turned "shitposter," in his words, with a knack for getting attention and a modest Rolodex of political contacts.

The three had plenty in common: Like Wax, Burra was a former drug dealer, though on a quite different scale – he got busted in 2014 for possession of more than two pounds of pot and 1,000 milligrams of psilocybin. Berger, meanwhile, was also in the import game – he imports a mundane but mildly humorous product he refuses to name on record. Berger is slim with short, curly red hair, and rectangular glasses – a sweater-over-oxford-shirts kind of guy. Burra is heavyset, cue-ball bald, with a robust black beard, and favors the extremely Staten Island combo of denim and flat-brim, snap-back baseball cap.

Within about a year, this motley crew effectively took over the alt-right party scene. Wax claims that by 2018, parties organized through an email and Facebook list called "Friends of Vish" drew crowds of more than 100, and they realized their social reach could be turned into something legitimate – a way to wrestle away control of NYC Republican institutions.

Their first target – a "beta test," Burra calls it – was the 2019 election inside the Metropolitan Republican Club, a staid social organization founded in 1902. In late 2018, the club had around 200 members on its rolls, and Wax worked as an unofficial "campaign manager" for Ian Reilly, an internal candidate for the MRC's presidency. A 200-voter internal election is a pretty easy target to manipulate, and Burra and Berger wanted to see if they could tip the scales with their party pals. By the election, Reilly had the endorsement of Yiannopoulos and the MRC had 800 new members on its rolls, most of whom Burra claims were contacts from their networks recruited to help with the win. Reilly easily swept the election, and they decided the mostly dormant NYYRC was next.

According to Wax, the MAGA takeover of the NYYRC was more of a peaceful transfer of power than insurrection. The NYYRC had been running on life-support

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Jack Crosbie**

THE NEXT GENERATION Vish Burra poses with Florida Rep. Matt Gaetz, his wife, Ginger, and another gala attendee (from left). Burra worked for Gaetz as he was investigated.

HOME BASE A campaign poster for Hungary's far-right Fidesz party, signed by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, in the NYYRC's clubhouse, a studio in midtown Manhattan.

for years – it had no clubhouse, infrequent meetings, and held little power in the local political scene. But its name still had weight: Founded in 1911, the club claims as members a long list of elected officials, including President Richard Nixon, New York Gov. Thomas Dewey, and New York City Mayor John Lindsay. In 2019, Wax, Berger, and Burra brought their networks to sweep them into office. Since then, the NYYRC has come back to life – per IRS documents, the club brought in $129,730 in membership dues in 2022, on top of $42,998 in contributions. Wax ballparked the total spend for the 2023 gala at close to $750,000.

After a few short years, the NYYRC can host lavish events and brush up against power in both the city and country. It has built that power through what can best be described as shit stirring. After Wax and Co. took over the club, they brought in Pamela Geller, a virulent Islamophobe notorious for opposing the "Ground Zero Mosque"; in 2020, they brought in Gaetz for a defiantly mask-free gala that caused so much controversy officials shut down the restaurant that agreed to host the event. In 2023, when Trump was indicted, the club released a feverish statement claiming that the former president's "soul is totally bonded with our core values and emotions, and he is our total and indisputable champion," which almost immediately spawned an article in *The Atlantic*.

"It was a masterful statement," Wax says. "We know it's fucking interesting, and we know people are going to discuss it, and then I know that I can sit down with a reporter and he's going to spend two hours in our clubhouse dissecting this Freudian overtone in our statement."

"I wrote that on the subway," Berger tells me about the statement, laughing.

THROUGHOUT THE FALL OF 2023, I dip in and out of NYYRC events. I get a range of responses and reactions to my presence; when I meet one man, he bellows, "Do you believe January 6 was an insurrection!" – more of an exclamation than a question. Another says they'll "pray you find the truth, the absolute truth in your journalism." There are many references to Republicans being the "party of Lincoln" as evidence that the GOP's racist reputation is overblown.

One of the first events I go to is a recent Republican primary debate. It's at the group's clubhouse, which is a generous name for the studio it rents in an unassuming building on Manhattan's 28th Street, three floors up a rickety staircase, past a framed sign reminding members to keep their voices down in the hall. Wax signed the lease in 2021, giving the group its first physical home since 1963. As I get there, the club is wrapping up a lecture on gun ownership.

When the debate starts, it's clear nobody really cares about the candidates on the screen. The young MAGA movement is still firmly, devoutly, behind Trump. Their reasons vary: Some are Catholic pro-life crusaders, others are fiscally-minded econ students. Many are deeply concerned with Joe Biden's perceived "open borders" (despite the fact that immigration policy has changed very little in the past three years), and almost all of them say they're convinced Trump's record of "no new wars" sets him apart as the peacemaker we need (despite the fact that Trump continued the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Syria, authorized massive arms deals to Saudi Arabia, and has threatened to go to war with Mexico in his second term). But the word that gets thrown around the most is "populism," and the conviction that 45 is the only one who can take on the deep state and big corporations is seen as gospel. The fact that he hasn't successfully done either of those things – well, that's just fake news.

At the debate party, I strike up a conversation with a young guy with glasses who introduces himself as Don. He and several others I speak to liked Ron DeSantis at first – before the Florida governor took a real shot at toppling Trump. "Now it's heresy," Don says, to consider DeSantis. With that in mind, I run Don through some 2024 scenarios: if Biden keels over (possible), if Trump keels over (I say possible, Don says less possible), if (I frame this cautiously) Trump succumbs to the myriad legal cases against him.

Don scoffs: "Even if all the charges against him are true – if you don't believe they're politically motivated, you've either got a stake through your brain or you were born retarded."

I have at least a dozen interactions like this while hanging out with the NYYRC. At the group's "MAGAween" party in late October, I overhear a woman wearing a "Make America Cowboy Again" shirt having an impassioned discussion about the Arizona recount in 2020 with someone in a Mormon-missionary outfit. A guy walks past wearing a dartboard with a picture of Biden's face. At one point, when I'm talking to partygoers about what they like about Trump, I push back on an assertion that his tax policies were a great boon to the working man, as he slashed the corporate tax rate and gave other breaks to the wealthy. "You sound like you're reading from a script," a woman says to me, narrowing her eyes.

This is generally how a night with the NYYRC goes. Everyone is friendly enough, talking happily about topics like religion or historical European martial arts (one man at the Halloween party was dressed in a full suit of armor). And then occasionally someone will say something that shocks me to my core. At another debate-watch party, I chat with a grad student in her late twenties who recently moved from the West Coast and is considering joining the club. I ask her how she split from her more liberal peers back home.

"I got kinda red-pilled by the gender stuff," she says.

"The gender stuff" comes up a lot with this crew. I've heard a variety of views on abortion and gay marriage – there are plenty of gay men in the NYYRC

MADE IN HIS IMAGE Club president Wax greets former President Donald Trump onstage at the club's annual gala, held at Cipriani Wall Street in Manhattan in December.

BULL'S-EYE An attendee wears a dartboard featuring President Joe Biden's face at the MAGAween party, where there was a category for "best nonbinary costume."

– but when it comes to trans and nonbinary people, there's derision, annoyance, or outright animosity. The MAGAween party had a category in the costume contest for "best nonbinary costume" because so many showed up in outfits mocking trans people.

"I didn't know there were young people like me in New York," the grad student tells me.

At this point, Don walks up. "A lot of people think they're alone," he says. "We're trying to wake up as many people as we can."

Don explains that he hopes the conservative movement can start to peel off votes from the Democrats by "punching left," as he calls it, by instituting a public option for health care, which Don thinks would be a great thing. "Do you want a fat, disgusting people who need mobility scooters to get around Walmart?" Don asks. "Or a healthy, vigorous people who can stand – literally stand – on their own two feet?"

"You should run for office," the grad student says. "You've convinced me!"

Don's quote rattles around my mind for weeks. Healthy, vigorous people, standing on their own two feet. It's a terrifying view of the world: that an ideal society requires purity, that the ugly afflictions of poverty deserve scorn and not compassion. Don has essentially given me the bullet points of how the modern American right makes an intellectual speedrun from being pissed off about wokes to nationalized socialism so a conservative party maintains power – and shown just how seductive that message of anger and disdain can be. It dovetails with other screeds I hear over the hours spent with the NYYRC – clenched-jaw rants against immigrants; callous, dehumanizing descriptions of trans people. ("Always check for an Adam's apple!" Wax jokes at one party.)

Wax, Burra, Berger, and the other members of the NYYRC's leadership know their members are going to say abhorrent stuff like this. They know that if a reporter hangs out at their parties for a few months he'll hear people toss around slurs like "retarded," "tranny," and "faggot." They know that if they make a YouTube shock jock the MC at their gala, he's going to tell racist jokes about Michelle Obama being a man and suggest Trump *should* go to prison because "it would help him with the Black vote." This is part of the plan.

THE WALLS OF THE NYYRC clubhouse are decorated with a kitschy array of political memorabilia. There's a framed photo of Nixon, a sign that says "TRUMP" made of shotgun shells, along with crosses and American flags. On one wall is an installation of plaques – laminated news articles set into heavy wood frames. *The New York Times,* the *New York Post, The New Yorker, New York Magazine* – all clipped and mounted, like big-game trophies in a hunting lodge. And these aren't – with the exception of the *Post* – puff pieces. The *Times* and *New York* have dishy takedowns of past gala events; *The New Yorker*'s is a snarky little dalliance about the "martinis with Roger Stone" event. When I start drafting this story in my head, fishing for adroit ways of capturing the young far-right's views, I can't stop thinking about the plaques.

"We know exactly what we're doing," Wax tells me a few days after the gala. We're sitting down for a beer at the Beach Cafe, an Upper East Side joint popular with the NYC political crowd, and particularly the right wing. "We know how to get headlines. We know how to be controversial."

I can't argue that point: It's why I'm here, talking to him for ROLLING STONE. It's another example of the hypocrisy at the heart of the Trump Media Handbook – these guys love the press. (Case in point: "Journalists and the media are shameless. Destroy them. Destroy their wives. Destroy their children ... No mercy," Burra later tweets, a few days before responding to fact checks for this story.) At the bar, Wax goes on about how other local Republican groups hate the NYYRC, how he's often at odds with the state and city party establishment, because his group endorses whoever it wants, says whatever it wants, and isn't beholden to outside donors or party funding. He loves this narrative, of course, because it's the one that brings in the most new members, the one that apparently gets the attention of Trump.

It's telling that Wax's campaign is mostly focused on internal GOP politics. Midway through our second lager, Wax tells me he doesn't have many interactions with left-wing groups in the city – they're not the opponents he's really interested in taking on. His counterparts are equally dismissive of him.

"No one in New York state government gives a shit about them," Jeremy Berman, a former president of the Manhattan Young Democrats club, tells me. "Literally no one cares in the world that I live in. If they end up overseeing Führer Trump setting up the concentration camps and I get a bullet in my head, then I guess they'll have the last laugh, but until then, they're a nonfactor."

NYYRC members do have a history of finding their way into positions of power. In the middle of the 20th century, club alumni worked in the Eisenhower administration, and newspaper archives are full of coverage from NYYRC events with speeches by familiar names – Nixon, Dewey, Barry Goldwater. That stuff is ancient history – but Wax and his friends are determined to bring the club's institutional rep back.

The initial steps are pretty small: Members of the NYYRC have been involved in several City Council races and state-level elections. In 2022, Wax successfully got a judge to throw out New York's gerrymandered State Assembly maps following a procedural error. While that decision may only gently affect New York's heavily Democratic State Assembly majority, it's a smaller skirmish in a wider redistricting war across the state that could have [*Cont. on 78*]

DUA LIPA IS GIVING US EVERYTHING

After a whirlwind couple of years, the wildly ambitious pop star is embracing freedom and fun — both in her life and on her upcoming album. As she kicks off a new era, she lets us into her dreams, her anxieties, and what she wants to stand for

BY BRITTANY SPANOS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL BAILEY-GATES

TIGER

"I AM LITERALLY GETTING THROWN INTO LIFE RIGHT NOW."

Dua Lipa is thinking about her Saturn return as she says this. At 28, she's deep in it now, but the astrology-loving star had been anticipating the foreboding planetary event for a while. It's a cosmic coming of age, usually when people are at the cusp of 30, marked by tons of transitions and transformations and upheaval. Lipa – who's about to start an entirely new chapter in her career – is feeling it all.

"It drags you by your feet," Lipa says in her North London lilt, relishing the chaos a bit. "I thought 28 was going to be so cute."

We're seated on the now-empty patio at Gjelina, a popular restaurant on Venice Beach's trendy Abbot Kinney Boulevard. (She sheepishly admits that her love for the show *Californication* made her want to see this street before she ever visited Los Angeles.) Lipa pulled up to lunch alone, weaving through once-packed tables in her tweed car coat, T-shirt, jeans, and sunglasses. Her hair, dyed a deep, mulled-wine red, makes her stick out immediately – which might be why the owner, who knows her dad and is also of Albanian descent, sends over a free dessert. "Albanians everywhere," she says with a shrug.

She's slightly jet-lagged, having landed from London a few days earlier. Two days before her flight, she released her new single, "Houdini," a neo-psychedelic dance-floor rager. The next morning, Grammy nominations were announced, and she found out her *Barbie* hit, "Dance the Night," was up for two awards, including Song of the Year. "I didn't even know they were coming out that day!" she says. She celebrated by going to her friend's DJ set, and admits she was kind of hungover for her flight.

But in between such big moments and celebrations, Lipa has been figuring out a lot about herself. Her highly anticipated third album is due later this year, and it captures a period of major changes in her life, including the end of a relationship and her forays into dating. She also parted ways with the management firm that represented her for a decade and bought back the rights to her music. Beyond that, she's been planting seeds and piling up projects that include her Service95 newsletter, movie roles, and a production company, plotting out exactly what she wants to do in the future.

"I'm being thrown into learning lessons of resilience," she says, "lessons of maybe not having to be so strong all the time and being OK with that." She searches for the words a bit. "I don't know.... I'm learning so much about myself."

Lipa may have already been more resilient than she realized. Look no further than her origin story: At 15, she famously persuaded her family to let her leave Kosovo and moved back to London, where she was born, completely alone. She finished school, passed her A-levels, and began waiting tables and modeling while seeking out a team and label to get her music career off the ground. Before she turned 20, she was signed.

In the years leading up to and following the release of her 2017 self-titled debut, Lipa hustled in the studio and on the road, playing festivals and opening for Troye Sivan, Bruno Mars, and Coldplay. The work paid off with hits like "New Rules" and a Best New Artist Grammy Award. Then, in 2020, her hyper-glam disco revival *Future Nostalgia* became a pandemic blockbuster that climbed the charts and launched her into main-pop-girl territory.

The album was a rebel yell for Lipa. It became an unlikely soundtrack for millions of people during lockdown, and made disco a ubiquitous trend in pop for the next few years. And with her warm, soulful voice, mixed with her undeniable self-assuredness, Lipa became the pop diva ready to meet an uncertain moment.

While she's one of the most-streamed artists in the world, she's also your favorite rock star's favorite pop star: When Elton John isn't calling her up for lavish dinners, Mick Jagger is busting a move with her at his Christmas party. "We had a full dance party, dancing with Mick Jagger in his living room," she says, laughing. She breaks into a light impression of Jagger: "He's like, 'All right, babe! Let's go, darling!' "

Last summer, Trent Reznor said that he found "Levitating" so "well-crafted" it made him tear up. ("That was too, too cool," Lipa says, smiling widely.) Recently, for her Service95 book club, Lipa spoke to Patti Smith, one of her heroes. Smith shared that she had seen a picture of Lipa in a chain-mail dress at the *Barbie* premiere and instantly thought of Joan of Arc. "Sometimes when I'm talking about things like this, I'm like, 'It feels weird that I am even talking about myself,' " Lipa says.

Lipa is everywhere, but many critics feel they have barely cracked the surface of who she is. She slipped so easily between genres that her sound, and personality, came off as inscrutable earlier in her career. Glimpses into her life outside of the spotlight would come in frequent but well-curated waves on her Instagram, the only social platform she runs herself. For her, music is a job – and her personal life remains just that. "I like to just live my life, do my photo dump, write my songs, and dip," she explains. "I'm not interested in trying to be controversial or do something for a reaction."

Her poise and disinterest in drama often leads people to cast her as a guarded, too-perfect pop bot. Jokes and criticism that she's not trying hard enough, not giving enough, have hurt her. In the middle of all this self-discovery, Lipa's been figuring out how to create more distance from the noise around her.

"It's always so easy with social media to get caught up in a negative spiral or people being mean, telling you what they think about you without really knowing you at all. It's already so far-fetched, maybe, for some people to think that you have feelings or that you get upset," she says. "For me, I think it's just important to be able to take things with a pinch of salt."

As unfazed as she may seem, some comments do sting. Take the reactions to something as innocuous as Lipa kicking back on vacation. After her *Future Nostalgia* tour wrapped in November 2022, Lipa spent the beginning of 2023 traveling the world with her family and friends. Fans dubbed her the "*vacanza* queen," commenting about how she's never home since her Instagram feed was full of photo dumps from places like Cannes and Ibiza.

"I think people are quick to forget," she says. "I was on tour up until the end of December. I felt like I missed out on so much time with my family and friends. It shows how short our attention span is, which is why music comes out so much faster."

Senior writer BRITTANY SPANOS *profiled Kylie Minogue in the October issue.*

OPENING SPREAD: DRESS BY HODAKOVA. EARRINGS BY LUCAS BAUER. TIGHTS BY WOLFORD. PREVIOUS TWO SPREADS: COAT BY FEAR OF GOD.

And then for just a second, she bristles slightly, exhausted by how something so harmless has been getting picked apart. "Of course, I was going to fucking holiday and chill [during] the year that I was just going in the studio and had some time off. As long as I'm doing my job, hitting my deadlines, and getting my shit done, then I will find a way to relax, too. It's really work hard and play hard. Why not?"

Lipa is working hard now. Her fans are eagerly awaiting her third album, which they've nicknamed DL3. She isn't quite ready to reveal the actual title, but she shares that it's a psychedelic-pop-infused tribute to U.K. rave culture. It's heavily inspired by acts like Primal Scream and Massive Attack, staples for a London girl with a penchant for late-night drives around her city. Even her aesthetic is a total 180 from her last era, toning down the glam, sparkly bodysuits in an effort to evoke the "don't give a fuck-ness" of Brit-pop acts like Oasis and Blur, more touchstones for her new music.

"This record feels a bit more raw," she says. "I want to capture the essence of youth and freedom and having fun and just letting things happen, whether it's good or bad. You can't change it. You just have to roll with the punches of whatever's happening in your life."

But Dua is still Dua, and she hasn't lost any of the command and drive that's brought her this far, even with her Saturn return serving up new lessons every day. There's a ton she's planning right now, and she's going to give her fans everything, even while taking things in stride. "I'm trying to move with a lightness, like 'nothing is the end of the world,' " she says. "Whatever happens is exactly the way it's supposed to be."

JUST A WEEK EARLIER, before our lunch date in L.A., Lipa was at home in London. It was November, and the city was characteristically dreary, the sky gray and the streets dusted with intermittent rain. From the outside, her house looks like a foreboding, industrial-style warehouse, locked down, gated, and brick-walled. She settled down here in December 2022 and lives near her childhood home and teenage haunts – she fondly points out that there's a club nearby where she saw J. Cole's first U.K. tour.

Walking into her house feels a little like stepping from a black-and-white landscape into full Technicolor: It might seem like a fortress from the outside, but like Lipa, the interior is sophisticated and inviting, full of thoughtfully curated decorations and cozy furniture fit for the numerous dinner parties she hosts here. Oversize orange and white couches surround heavy granite coffee tables. Against one wall is a walnut cabinet accented with tchotchkes and a copy of Patti Smith's *M Train*. A giant color wheel looms over her white record player, while on the same wall hangs a collage of the Muppets painted by the art collective FriendsWithYou. On the bench below, a crate of records has an Oasis bootleg perched at the front, alongside a few artfully placed vintage books that include William A. Emboden's history of hallucinogenic botanicals, *Narcotic Plants,* and the screenplay for *Paris, Texas*.

Lipa is wrapping up a meeting with her team in another part of the house, but within minutes, she walks into the living room. She is in the middle of a promotional blitz that includes radio appearances, photo shoots, and social media content. Though she's dressed down in jeans and a Palace Unitas sweatshirt, her eyes are done up in a heavy, smoked-out cat eye from an on-camera appearance that morning. Her red hair is down, except for two tiny, face-framing braids.

Lipa began working on new music in 2021, long before her *Future Nostalgia* tour started. At the time, it was still unclear if there would even *be* a tour, given all of the pandemic-related delays and health concerns. "I was like, 'I might as well get back in the studio and start working on a new project.' And for me, I just have to write a lot until I get my idea."

The album didn't take shape until after the second leg of her yearlong tour was over. The exact date – maybe it was June? Lipa's brow furrows as she tries to remember, and because she needs to be precise, she jumps off the orange couch we're sitting on and walks toward the seemingly normal, white brick wall next to us. It turns out it's actually a secret doorway to her bedroom.

"It's so heavy," she groans, struggling to pry it open. But she returns holding a thick notebook that she purchased from CVS that's covered in abstract, absent-minded Dua doodles. The pages are filled with notes and handwritten lyrics, and she flips to the date in question – July 2022 – which is when she first met Tame Impala's Kevin Parker. "I was so nervous because I'm just such a fan of Kevin's," Lipa says.

Parker, she remembers, "was quite shy in the beginning." She invited him to a session with three other people she had been working with that summer: her longtime collaborator Caroline Ailin, who co-wrote "Don't Start Now" and "New Rules," electronica auteur Danny L Harle (Caroline Polachek, Charli XCX), and folky-pop balladeer Tobias Jesso Jr. (Adele, Niall Horan). Putting these four disparate musical personalities together was a risky gamble that paid off.

"After a while, we all just loosened up together," Lipa recalls. By the end of the first day at London's 5DB, the group had "a really good" song. By the end of the week, they had three. "I remember thinking it was a genius move to get that combination of people together," Parker says. "Like, hats off to her."

Lipa refers to this particular group as her "band"; they ended up making eight of the 11 tracks on the album. Outside of Ailin, everyone was mostly new to her. She admits that she had been apprehensive about letting new people into her orbit: "As things get bigger, you get more scared to open up and be vulnerable and sit down in a room and just speak from the heart," she says.

Part of that might be because Lipa was sorting out a bunch of stuff in her personal life – boundaries, breaks, balance. In December 2021, right as she was entering tour rehearsals, the tabloids reported her breakup with model Anwar Hadid (the brother of Bella and Gigi Hadid), who she dated for two years. She spent the following year tiptoeing back into single life. "Dating, I think overall, is just a little confusing," she says, which is somehow both comforting and terrifying to hear from someone even Margot Robbie has said she has a crush on. "It's either through friends of friends or people you trust where you can meet new people, because [dating] is not really so straightforward when you are, I guess, a public person." (Lipa started a new relationship last year, but confirms she's single again on a call in December.)

According to Ailin, they "always started with the truth." Lipa would arrive to sessions with Ailin, Harle, Jesso, and Parker, armed with stories from the night before, chronicling the often-ridiculous ride that is dating in your mid-twenties.

The final product is uniquely and utterly Dua Lipa: confident dance pop full of witty Instagram-caption-ready one-liners. A lot of the songs are playful scenes from clubs or nights out with friends; the lyrics toggle from warnings that she'll make a fast escape to optimism about what a first kiss could become. There are no sweeping ballads, though there is one good ballad fake-out that blooms into a more buoyant Carole King- and Fleetwood Mac-inspired moment. Mostly, this album is straightforward pop bliss, not unlike her approach to *Future Nostalgia*.

Lipa doesn't talk about her love life in depth. People will have to look to the music to get a sense of her private thoughts: One song juxtaposes light harmonies with a tumultuous portrait of a relationship coming to an end: "We call it love but hate it here/ Did we really mean it when we said forever?" she sings. But another highlight – one of Lipa's favorites on the record – is all about maturity and healing. The dreamy, midtempo track plays out like an updated take on Gwen Stefani's "Cool." In the lyrics, she compliments her ex's new relationship, calling his new girlfriend "really pretty," and she finds peace as he moves on: "I must have loved you more than I ever knew.... I'm not mad/I'm not hurt/You got everything you deserve."

"When you have a feeling like that one, you feel really grown because you're like, 'Oh, whoa, I'm such an evolved human being that I can see my ex move on and feel good about it,' " she explains. For Lipa, writing about letting go without animosity was a new experience: "I think I've had breakups in my life where I felt like the only kind of breakup you could have was when things just ended really badly," she says. "Things ending in a nice way was such a new thing.... It taught me a lot."

For the sound on the album, she thought back to British club culture and the type of carefree abandon she feels when she's on the dance floor. Lipa's collaborators helped unlock that energy: She met Harle at "the afterparty of an afterparty of a show" through Andrew Wyatt, who co-wrote Lipa's first single, "New Love," as well as her *Barbie* hit. Wyatt and Harle had done stuff for Polachek, who opened for Lipa's tour. They'd also worked with a less-expected collaborator that piqued Lipa's interest: former Oasis singer Liam Gallagher. On Gallagher's album, Harle was credited as a "rave consultant" responsible for the breakbeat element on the 2022 cut "I'm Free," which he co-produced with Wyatt.

"Dua really enjoyed that," Harle says. "Dua likes going to a rave." (This is true: "I love being on the dance floor, and being the first on the dance floor if nobody else is dancing," Lipa says.)

Other inspirations came from Lipa's upbringing in London: The mixes that played late in the evening on Radio 1 were a huge guide; that's where she first heard some of her favorite Primal Scream remixes, which eventually led her to their 1991 LP, *Screamadelica*. And in addition to Oasis and Blur, she found herself turning to more of the Nineties rock and electronica acts she grew up listening to, like Moby and Gorillaz.

I mention that some of those Brit-pop influences – Noel Gallagher and Damon Albarn in particular – haven't always been very kind to female pop artists (both have taken shots at the likes of Adele and Taylor Swift, for example). I ask her if she's ever met any of them.

"I haven't had any encounters with them, actually," she says. "Sometimes you have to separate the art from the person.... It's more like the music element, the aspect of it that I'm really connected to. The way that [some Brit-pop artists] acted, the things

PRODUCED BY RHIANNA RULE FOR PALM PRODUCTIONS. PHOTOGRAPHY DIRECTION BY EMMA REEVES. STYLING LORENZO POSOCCO. HAIR STYLING BY PETER LUX AT THE WALL GROUP. MAKEUP BY NINA PARK FOR KALPANA. TAILORING BY DIANA AGHAJANYAN. PRODUCTION MANAGER: ALEXIS BOOKER. STYLING ASSISTANCE: RAE HAYDEN AND LP STUDIO. HAIR STYLING ASSISTANCE: ALLIE ELLIS. MAKEUP ASSISTANCE: YUKARI BUSH. PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE: JACK CLARKE AND MIKEY DE VERA.

"FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE, I THROW MYSELF INTO SOMETHING SO HEAVILY TO GET IT RIGHT AND TO MAKE IT PERFECT."

that they've done, they're obnoxious for sure. That's their whole thing."

They seem to represent a certain version of toxic rock masculinity, I say, and Lipa agrees, pondering what the world expected from rock stars in the past. "There's so much toxicity in the way people wanted their artists or their musicians," she says. "If they weren't like that, they would've been seen as boring, and I think that's such a bad way to see things."

As raw and loose as the album sounds, Lipa's process was painstakingly detailed. The collaborators call Lipa a "meticulous" editor who rewrote every line until she felt it was perfect. "Her editing is brutal," Parker says. The lead single, "Houdini," for example, took months to get right. "I'd kind of recoil in horror and go, 'Oh, no, it's a great verse!' " Parker says. "But then an hour later, we'd have something that I can't imagine not being in the song."

"I don't think there's a single song on this record that I didn't go back and want to rewrite and perfect and change and work on it a bit more and dig a little deeper and see if we could go any further," Lipa admits. But her method worked: Every single one of the collaborators raves about the chemistry and the cohesiveness Lipa engineered.

"Everyone was going, 'Is this normal? This feels too good to be true,' " Jesso says. "It's the pinnacle of my writing career. There's nothing you could get better than that."

The truth is, you can't be as ambitious and precise as Lipa is without giving a fuck. "I really care about how the fans respond," she says. (After "Houdini" was released, she was frustrated that people said it still sounded "disco" when none of her influences come from there.)

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't care about what the critics thought.... When you put your heart and soul into something, you want people collectively to be like, 'Oh, it's changed sonically, and it's been something different.' "

She's noticed a pattern with all of her singles so far, how they don't start at the top and "gradually grow" over time. "They take so long and never get to Number One, but they stay around for a long time," she says. There's no irritation or anger in her voice when she says this; while a Number One in the U.S. would be nice, the longevity feels like a hard-earned win.

"As long as the songs stick around and people are listening to them, I'm cool with that," she says.

When it's time to leave, London is a darker shade of gray. Lipa walks me to the door, holding open my jacket for me to stick my arms into. She tells me about her dinner plans at BRAT, a Michelin-star restaurant in Shoreditch where she's meeting up with a primary-school friend. After she recommends the negroni at the restaurant where I'm heading to meet friends, the gates close behind me. Like she promised, the negroni is delicious.

LIPA CAN TRACE HER meticulous nature back to when she was a child. As a kid, she ran a blog called Dua Daily, a Service95 prototype where she would share her style tips and recipes. And as the oldest of three, she's taken her job as a big sister as seriously as she has taken her gigs as both tastemaker and pop superstar. Her siblings were in school when Lipa's career started taking off, and are now forging their own paths; her sister wants to be an actress, while her brother is producing music.

"It's cool to just see them have their goals," she says, grinning proudly. "I'd be like, 'Oh, you guys want to come over?' And they're like, 'Oh, no, I'm busy. I've got a studio session.' " Lipa sees their parents, Anesa and Dukagjin, as her blueprint: Anesa had been studying to be a lawyer and Dukagjin was both a musician and a dentist in Kosovo before they fled their homes in the early Nineties when the Bosnian war broke out. The couple completely started over in the U.K., where their three kids were born.

"My parents are really the people I look back on for everything," she says. "While I was a kid, they never made me feel like anything was ever wrong. They know they tried to give me as normal of a childhood as they could, while at the same time just working so hard, and working in bars, and restaurants, and pubs, and all that."

When Lipa was 11, her family moved back to Kosovo's capital city, Pristina, after the war. It felt like heaven to Lipa, who got to stay out a little bit later and move more independently in the city's streets, which, she says, were much safer than London's.

School was harder, though. "It was so much more advanced than in London," she says, her eyes widening from the memory. Science, chemistry, and math were particularly tough. "The kids were learning shit that I thought I had time to learn. I was doing fractions in London, and algebra in Kosovo."

Luckily, Lipa seems to like a challenge. She would make bets with her mom, like one where she could get her belly button pierced if she got an A in math. She got a tutor and, eventually, her piercing.

"Maybe I thrive on being undermined, or maybe I thrive on people saying that I can't do things," she says. "For better or for worse, I throw myself into something so heavily to get it right and to make it perfect, make it good."

Earlier in her career, her low-key demeanor was interpreted as a lack of personality onstage. The "Go girl, give us nothing" meme took off around 2018 after it was left as a comment on a video of Lipa looking either bored or tired while doing a lackluster hip-swiveling dance move. It's something Lipa brings up during our interview, once without being prompted and another time after being pressed about how much it seems to have stuck with her.

"I did find that really hurtful, and I found it really painful because I was like, 'I'm finally getting to do something that I love to do, and I'm being shut down, that I just can't seem to do anything right,' " she says. "Not only that, but I was also being thrown around the world. Lots of promos, lots of rehearsing, lots of everything, and not having really time to perfect anything."

Lipa began rolling out "Houdini" on Instagram by playing with the illusionist theme of the song's namesake, posting then deleting teaser photos until announcing the track's release date. She also wiped away her past few years of *Future Nostalgia* and trips around the globe on the app. But, perhaps unwittingly, the theme played into ideas of Lipa as a slippery, hard-to-pin-down pop star: A viral thread on X posted a week after "Houdini" was released described her as a "mystery," with indiscernible personality traits. "She's everywhere and nowhere," read a follow-up post.

Lipa gets frustrated with the connotation, especially since it's trailed her for a while now. "I think I'm British," she offers. "I don't think I'm here to spill my guts on a talk show because it's going to be good for a news cycle or getting attention.... As much as people think they know the people they support, I actually don't think they know anything about them anyway."

Most of the time, Lipa makes her business moves in silence. That's why her fans were shocked when she quietly parted ways with her TaP management team in 2022. A friend of hers helped set up Lipa with TaP CEO Ben Mawson in 2013, when she was just a teenager waiting tables in London. After news broke that Lipa was leaving TaP, she signed on her father as her manager, flipping the way most management shake-ups usually go in pop music.

"To be really quite honest, I can't talk so much about the whole thing," Lipa says, mentioning the litigious nature of the situation. (She says there was a settlement that allowed her to buy back the publishing rights to her music; a TaP spokesperson confirms that Lipa bought her publishing in 2023, a year after their management relationship ended.) Still, the experience reaffirmed how important it is for her to be as well-versed on the business side as she is with the creative elements of her career. "The creative side is the way that I express myself, but I think being able to also understand that this is my name, this is what I stand for, these are the things that are important to me, and how that actually goes hand in hand with the artistry nowadays."

She offers a warning to younger artists: "Pay attention early on, especially in the business side of things.... I don't think enough people tell young artists that. Everything feels so exciting in the beginning, and of course it is, but it's good to have the knowledge, and good to take care of yourself."

Lipa brings up "knowledge" often. She understands the way the general public looks at her and other female pop stars, refusing to believe that they are more than their looks or their hits.

LONG-SLEEVE TOP BY MOWALOLA. UNDERWEAR BY MIU MIU. SHOES BY MAISON MARGIELA. TIGHTS BY WOLFORD.

"THEY DON'T WANT YOU TO BE POLITICAL. THEY DON'T WANT YOU TO BE SMART.... THERE IS SO MUCH MORE TO ME THAN JUST WHAT I DO."

"I don't know if people believe that I like to read books, or people believe that these conversations are my own," she says. She seems a little resigned – frustrated, even – at how limiting that perception can feel. "I think it's a thing of what people want from their pop stars," she says. "They don't want you to be political. They don't want you to be smart. Not that I'm trying to prove myself in that way, but there is so much more to me than just what I do."

Lipa points back to the experiences of her parents and how it has shaped her worldview. "My existence is kind of political, the fact that I lived in London because my parents left from the war." She doesn't break eye contact as she says this, serious in her tone. "I feel for people who have to leave their home. From my experience of being in Kosovo and understanding what war does, no one really wants to leave their home. They do it for protection, to save their family, to look after the people around them, that kind of thing, for a better life. So I feel close to it."

Lipa has found it hard to stay silent on many issues, especially those that feel similar to what her parents experienced during the war. That's why she has long been an outspoken advocate for the Palestinian people. But in 2021, *The New York Times* ran a full-page ad from Rabbi Shmuley Boteach and the World Values Network accusing Lipa and the Hadid sisters of antisemitism for their support of Palestinian liberation. Lipa took to social media to condemn the organization's accusations – as well as the paper for running the ad. A year later, she invited former *Times* editor Dean Baquet on her podcast and asked him directly how the paper could publish something "so damaging and potentially dangerous."

"Speaking to an editor was important for me because I felt like I was put in danger and I was put in a place where my core values were completely flipped on its head, and that really hurt because I feel like when I do want to speak about something, I hope that people will see it for what it is and that there is no malicious intent," she says now.

More recently, she's signed and supported a petition for a cease-fire to the Israel-Hamas war that has torn Gaza to shreds and displaced millions.

"My feelings on displaced people [are] very real and raw, and it is a difficult subject to speak about because it's so divisive," she says. There's a somber shift as she carefully gathers her thoughts. "But there is a world where you can feel for all lives that are being lost. And I have to say this: I don't condone what Hamas is doing, regardless of what [that advertisement in] *The New York Times* said [in 2021]. Every life is precious."

As she continues, she points out how important it is for people to properly educate themselves on the crisis, especially in the face of rampant misinformation.

"I feel so bad for every Israeli life lost and what happened on Oct. 7," she says. "At the moment, what we have to look at is how many lives have been lost in Gaza, and the innocent civilians, and the lives that are just being lost. There are just not enough world leaders that are taking a stand and speaking up about the humanitarian crisis that's happening, the humanitarian cease-fire that has to happen."

Like many, Lipa feels powerless in the face of the ongoing conflict. Her solution remains being as informed as possible while using her platform to encourage her fans to do the same.

"It's probably easier to be apolitical," she says. "I think there's no kind of deep discussion about war and oppression. It just is something that we've seen happen time and time again. I feel like just being a musician and posting about something doesn't make enough of a difference, but hopefully, just showing solidarity, which is sometimes all you feel like you can do, is important."

'DO YOU SMOKE?" Lipa asks, standing on the private balcony of her suite at the Chateau Marmont. She brings over two Parliaments, lamenting that the hotel doesn't have her usual Marlboro Lights; in the new year, Lipa will announce that she's quitting smoking altogether. She sits down carefully in the structured, leather Jacquemus dress she has on for the night. (It's a lot easier to maneuver in than the dress she wears to the Golden Globes in January; she posted a video of herself struggling to sit in her tightly corseted custom Schiaparelli gown after the show.) She strikes a match and lights both cigarettes while staring out at the sea of billboards on Sunset Boulevard.

Lipa likes coming to Chateau when she's out in Los Angeles, with its spooky vibe and the chance of running into people she knows downstairs at the exclusive, celebrity-filled restaurant.

"If these walls could talk, I wonder what the fuck they would say," she says before taking a drag of her cigarette. Above the quiet hum of the traffic below, she talks about the ghost stories she's heard about this place. "I wouldn't go into Bungalow Three," she says, referring to where John Belushi died. Her paranormal curiosity is reserved for the secret tunnels that she's heard about beneath Harry Houdini's estate in Laurel Canyon. We'll be heading there soon for the second of three "Houdini" fan events she's hosting.

Back inside her suite, her glam team is going through racks of designer clothes, organizing what they can. In two days, Lipa will jet off to Tokyo for another fan event, then return to Los Angeles for *Barbie* promos ahead of award season. In between, she'll go back to London, then to New York a couple of times, and even fit in a girls' trip to Copenhagen. She'll end the year in India with her family, a quick break before she begins volleying herself across the world again for more of the same.

Though her career as a singer is the priority, she wonders if there's a future where her path changes, comparing pop stardom to "a hamster wheel."

"You make the album, you promote it, you go on tour, you do the same thing, and that's so amazing, but I think there's going to come a point where maybe I want to take just a little bit longer [in between]," she confesses. "I have all these other things that I can also do that really interest me."

Lipa established her own production, publishing, and management company, Radical22, with which she's making her passion projects come to life. This includes a documentary on her beloved London neighborhood of Camden that she's executive-producing with Disney+. She's been enjoying the process of booking interviews with artists like Little Simz, who will appear in the doc.

Following her cameo as Mermaid Barbie in *Barbie*, she will play a suave spy in Matthew Vaughn's comedy *Argylle*, which comes out this year. "It was a lot of fun, but a massive learning curve," she admits. "I remember when Matthew reached out for me to do a part in this, I [thought] I should go and do some acting lessons." Vaughn persuaded her not to, hoping she'd just be herself on camera. "If she was nervous, she hid it well," Vaughn says. He sought out the star after seeing her don a sparkly fringe Valentino dress on *The Graham Norton Show*. ("It sort of looked like a Christmas decoration with legs and arms," he says. "She looked amazing.")

There's other stuff Lipa wants to accomplish: She could see herself moving outside of the U.K. one day, maybe to Barcelona, or Madrid, or Paris, or Mexico City. She's been learning Spanish and French; by 35, she wants to be more fluent in both, as well as Italian. "I want to know all of them," she says. "I get so jealous when people are speaking in French, or Spanish, or Italian, and I'm like, 'Fuck.' I just want to respond. I think I can pick them up fairly easily because of Albanian, although it's quite different."

She's started to pick up guitar, recently learning "Knockin' on Heaven's Door." Maybe in a few years, she'll take some college courses, too. "I started working so young that I just feel like there's going to be a little moment where I do some more sharpening of my knives," she says.

Before long, it's time for her to head to the Houdini Estate, where fans are taking advantage of the open bar, free tacos, and dance floor. Lipa makes a grand entrance, descending a spiral staircase and joining the DJ behind the booth. She dances and sings along to two spins of "Houdini," grabbing people's phones to take a few selfies and videos.

She comes and goes as quickly as promised. She jumps into one of three Escalades transporting her crew around the city. Once she's in the car, she climbs out of the window to give me a hug goodbye. Then she's off, heading back toward the Chateau and its ghosts – and wherever else the night takes her.

COAT BY FERRAGAMO. JEANS BY CELINE BY HEDI SLIMANE.

PHOTO CREDIT

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City mph

Formula 1 ripped through the streets of Vegas in a spectacle meant to solidify the sport's rising U.S. popularity. But was it all worth it?

By David Hill

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROGER KISBY

It looks like a fireball

The Ferrari hurtles down the Vegas Strip at about 200 miles per hour, a cloud of orange sparks billowing out from underneath the car. The driver, Carlos Sainz, does what he can to bring the $15 million machine to a stop. He isn't sure what happened, but knows something is wrong. He's right.

A drain cover on Las Vegas Boulevard came loose, flying up and into the car, tearing apart the chassis and cracking the floor. The Ferrari is fucked, to be sure. But a few inches in another direction and that drain cover may have come all the way through the floor and into Sainz's body, and he'd be much more than fucked. He'd be dead.

The cars in Formula 1's Las Vegas Grand Prix have only been on the track – which in this case is actual city streets that normal cars drive on every day – for a total of eight minutes when Sainz hits the drain. It is the first practice session of the weekend, the first time the multimillion-dollar, state-of-the-art race cars have been on the sport's newest course – a moment more than a year in the making. Fans from all over the world, Vegas locals, and media vultures like me have waited impatiently for this moment, and figured the odds against the Las Vegas Grand Prix ending up in some kind of fiasco were better than 6-5. Here we are, a week before Thanksgiving at a quarter to midnight the Thursday before race weekend, being proven correct. Over the next two hours, we watch trucks drive around the 3.8 mile course, pouring sand and concrete into the myriad drain covers in a hurried attempt to get things back on track.

Somewhere close to 2 a.m. they kick us all out. The cars finish their practice in the wee small hours of the morning without any fans watching. The next morning, race officials say anyone who bought a practice ticket (around $200) would be given credit at the Formula 1 store (where hats cost $100 and T-shirts $80). Anyone who bought a ticket for the whole weekend will get nothing. Before the weekend is over, a class-action lawsuit is filed on behalf of more than 35,000 fans.

Formula 1 fans line the streets ahead of the first-ever Las Vegas race last fall.

As I wander through the morass early Friday morning, trying to find my way back to my hotel, I'm not sure how to feel about this auspicious start to Formula 1's Las Vegas debut. On one hand, the real-time failure of a $600 million sporting event that McLaren chief Zak Brown had boasted would be "the largest sporting event in the world this year" will surely make for good copy. Pride goeth before the fall and all that. On the other hand, those brief eight minutes of seeing the world's fastest race cars firing down the Strip, bathed in the bright lights and framed by these sky-high totems of American excess and leisure, loud enough to feel in my bones – well, that was undeniably cool. I wanted more.

FORMULA 1, which has been around for roughly 75 years, is the most popular motorsport in the world – but it never really found an audience here in the States. For U.S. greasers, NASCAR has ruled. America's most popular motorsport started roughly the same time as Formula 1, but with a far different history and trajectory. While Formula 1 evolved from international competitions between governments, car manufacturers, and millionaires, NASCAR started out as races between moonshiners and bootleggers who modified cars to outrun cops. NASCAR developed into a bona fide big deal, with media rights worth billions by the mid-aughts. Unlike F1, which markets itself as the sport of the aristocracy and has fans all over the world, NASCAR's fan base is largely in the American South and rural areas where auto-racing culture is fostered by local drag strips and dirt tracks.

F1 doesn't just have a different history and fan base, it's also a radically different sport. While NASCAR cars are pretty much all the same, F1 teams spend more than $100 million each to design, build, and race individually unique cars that are probably more closely related to a spaceship than any car you or I would ever ride in, let alone drive. Ten teams compete in a series of a couple dozen races that take place on racetracks and city streets all around the globe.

Lately, you've probably been hearing more about F1. In 2016, the American company Liberty Media bought F1 for $4.4 billion, and it has worked to grow the sport's fan base here ever since. And it's working. Liberty's first gambit was the Netflix docuseries *Drive to Survive,* which debuted in 2019 and is now in its sixth season. The show's popularity led to ESPN and F1 signing a reported $255 million media-rights deal before the 2023 season, and the American viewership set a record in 2022 with 1.21 million average viewers, more than double the number from 2018.

The Las Vegas Grand Prix is Liberty's latest ploy, and it's sparing no expense – from the racetrack to A-list entertainment to world-class chefs. The plan is to put on a show the likes of which no Formula 1 circuit – not even the storied and sophisticated Monaco Grand Prix – has ever seen. "We knew we wanted a new crown jewel in the portfolio, and we knew we wanted to race here in Las Vegas," Renee Wilm, Liberty's chief legal and administrative officer, tells me. "I have said from time to time that Las Vegas is the Monaco of North America."

But is it? Vegas and Monaco may both be gambling centers and playgrounds for the über rich. But Casino

Hundreds of millions of dollars went into transforming Vegas into a racetrack.

de Monte-Carlo enforces a dress code and charges admission, while Las Vegas is a kitschy spectacle, a postmodern middlebrow mishmash where everything from fine art and Michelin-star dining to strip clubs are on hand 24-7 and lit up in looping neon. A race in Vegas would be a new proposition for Formula 1, casting aside pomposity for good old American tackiness.

Die-hard fans have already struggled with the way Liberty Media and *Drive to Survive* appeared to be Americanizing the sport, turning it into a reality show focused more on drama than racing. A crown jewel in this most American of cities might be more than legacy fans could bear, and not something new American fans may even want. In the end, would the $600 million Liberty was betting on Vegas pay off?

I ARRIVE IN LAS VEGAS on Wednesday, in time for the opening ceremonies. I get my first glimpse of the track as close as you could get. Andrew Gnatovich, author of the blog Las Vegas Cabbie Chronicles, gives me a tour. Along with Albert Park, Monaco, Baku, and Singapore, the Las Vegas Grand Prix is one of only five courses driven on streets open to the public instead of on a dedicated racetrack, so regular traffic drives the track until 5 p.m. Gnatovich and I trace the course the race cars would soon navigate, albeit in his Chevy Malibu. "When they first announced the event, I thought, 'What a cool showcase for Vegas. What a cool showcase for F1. It's a perfect marriage," he says. "A Saturday night on the Las Vegas Strip, cars doing 200 miles an hour – what is not cool about that?"

"I have said from time to time that Las Vegas is the Monaco of North America."

The effort to turn Las Vegas into a racetrack has been nothing short of herculean. The city is no stranger to construction, with some of the largest buildings in America routinely demolished and rebuilt here every year. But this was something new. Nearly 2,900 workers spent 378 days to build a 300,000-square-foot permanent paddock facility to hold garages and offices, repaved miles of city streets with more than 100,000 tons of pavement, and built miles of temporary structures along the course to house fans, pop-up restaurants, nightclubs, and concert stages. As the construction tied up traffic and the project temporarily bulldozed everything in its way (including trees planted in front of the Bellagio 25 years ago), local sentiment turned against the race.

"It got worse and worse," Gnatovich says. "And some time around when they started building the grandstands in front of the Bellagio is when I flip-flopped on it. They took up two lanes of southbound traffic on the Strip for going on three months."

Across Las Vegas, cars sport "Fuck Formula 1" stickers, and nobody I speak to – from local friends to service workers – has anything good to say about the race. "Any local crossing their fingers that F1's only gonna be here for three years, I think, is in for a rude awakening," Gnatovich says. To placate the locals, race organizers offered them discounted tickets. The only catch was they were for practice sessions, not the race, which felt like adding insult to injury. Tickets for the actual race were offered at a mighty cost.

"The initial price was insane," says JB, a local bar owner and ticket broker (which is what scalpers call themselves these days). I meet up with JB at the Double Down Saloon, a local dive-bar staple on Paradise Road, where the walls are covered in graffiti and stickers for punk bands, and the house has a drink called Ass Juice that they basically dare you to try. JB buys a round of Ass Juice for the bar and shoots his back no problem. He texts some of his scalper buddies and asks, "Did you guys buy F1?" They both respond immediately with "No."

"The minimum was like a thousand-plus for GA," JB says. "Who is paying a thousand for GA?" And pric-

[ABOVE] ***Vegas cab driver Andrew Gnatovich drives on the F1 racetrack — which was made from city streets and used by regular traffic until 5 p.m. race weekend.*** *[BELOW]* ***The local airport was so packed that overflow was directed to land nearby in Henderson, Nevada, where 18 acres of new private-jet parking spots were added ahead of the race.***

es only went up from there. The Bellagio's Fountain Club sold out of $11,250-per-person three-day packages that included rooms and tickets to the race. (The average room rate for the weekend was $2,200.) But not every property had such an easy time moving tickets. By the time JB and I sit down at the Double Down, tickets are still available to the race, and prices have dropped precipitously. "It's solidly falling off a cliff," he says. "I wanna say tickets for tonight are under a hundred bucks."

The price drop wasn't likely due to a lack of interest. Buzz was high among race fans and casual observers alike. But ticket prices were off the charts, even by Formula 1's own standards. The average three-day ticket price of $1,667 is more than triple the cost of most other Grands Prix around the world, to say nothing of how it compared to other events in Las Vegas, where extravagance and value have always figured out how to coexist. This is, after all, the home of comped suites and crab legs on the buffet.

The lack of a sellout is evident later that night from the rooftop of the highly exclusive Paddock Club, where I'm perched to watch the opening ceremonies. I face the main grandstand, where a lot of the seats remain empty at showtime. The show includes performances from Kylie Minogue, Thirty Seconds to Mars, and John Legend, who makes his entrance from up here on the roof. The Blue Man Group roam around the paddock, interrupting the live broadcast and generally freaking out Europeans who you'd think would be used to the avant garde. As Andra Day takes the stage to sing her rendition of "Come Together," it begins to rain.

But the show goes on. Up and down the Strip, there's a drone show, pyrotechnics, fireworks, and a dramatic entrance by each of the 20 drivers, lifted up to a series of platforms on the track from hidden chambers below. It's all very Vegas, and very un-Formula 1. (Max Verstappen, reigning world champion, would later complain that he felt like "a clown.") Ordinarily these guys would be sleeping, or engaged in other race prep. This performance is one of many they'll make throughout the week, either in private hospitality suites or on big stages around the track in "fan zones" surrounded by cheering mobs.

"I understand that fans, they need maybe something to do as well around the track," the normally stoic Verstappen said during a press conference. "But I think it's more important that you actually make them understand what we do as a sport because most of them just come to have a party, drink, see a DJ play or a performance act.

"They don't actually understand what we're doing or what we're putting on the line to perform."

THE FOLLOWING DAY, the whales begin to arrive. Las Vegas airport's private-jet parking spaces quickly fill up, and planes are told to drop off their well-heeled passengers and then take off again, a "drop and go" in airport parlance, ideally to park in nearby Henderson, Nevada, where 18 acres of new private-jet parking spots were added ahead of the race.

Around the track there's a last-minute scramble by construction crews, restaurant staffs, bus drivers, security guards – even race crews – to get ready on time. Thursday night is the initial practice sessions for the cars. F1 cars are put together for each race in roughly 48 hours in tiny 92-foot-deep garages. That means practice sessions are essential to feel out the car and how it drives on any specific track. The car is, for all intents and purposes, a brand-new car each and every race.

With an expected crowd of more than 300,000 fans, everyone in Vegas, not just the drivers, needed a practice run.

The drain-cover debacle exposed more than just a weakness in the track, it exposed gaps within the entire operation. Not only did organizers not anticipate drain covers flying off during the race, they also didn't predict how delays like this would impact the schedules of those like shuttle-bus drivers. The next day plenty of ink would be spilled about the Formula 1 fiasco in the desert, but they still had until Saturday night to get things right. All was not yet lost.

FRIDAY MORNING I meet up with David Woodley at the Peppermill diner, which cuts a decidedly old-school profile with its 1980s neon pink and purple, and takes up valuable real estate next to the luxurious Wynn. Woodley is the chief revenue officer for BallIsLife, a basketball media company, and is an F1 watcher. "I grew up a big racing fan," he says. Unlike me, and a lot of the rapidly growing U.S. Formula 1 fan base who discovered it through *Drive to Survive,* Woodley followed it early on, moving from NASCAR to Formula 1 in a quest to cheer on the absolute fastest cars in the world. The engineering feat of it all appealed to him.

Unlike NASCAR, Formula 1 cars are unique and put together before each race.

"The guys working on this are like rocket scientists. They could be solving the problems of the world, but they're out there trying to find an extra 10th of a second," Woodley says. "I was hooked."

His first race was the Montreal Grand Prix, where he expected to encounter something wholly different from what he was used to here. "NASCAR's very blue-collar, not upscale. And Formula 1 had that upscale feel, but you could still bring a cooler full of beer into the stands, which is fun, right?"

When the Las Vegas Grand Prix was announced in 2022, Stefano Domenicali, CEO of Formula 1, said it would be a "truly spectacular celebration that has never been seen in our sport before, in the greatest arena on Earth." Mercedes driver Lewis Hamilton said the event would be "pretty hardcore" and McClaren driver Daniel Ricciardo, who was in the last year of his contract, said, "I was gonna retire. I will not no more."

Woodley pounced, buying four front-of-stretch tickets for about $2,500 a piece. "They did a good job of creating hype and FOMO," he tells me. "And I guess I fell for it."

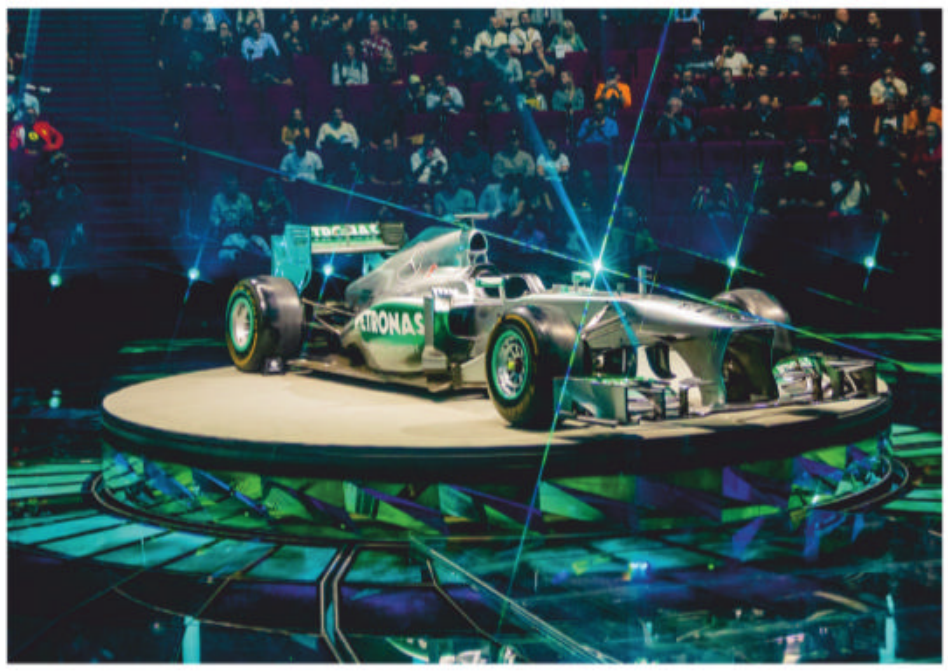
After breakfast, I make my way over to the Wynn to watch one of the week's more garish displays of wealth: a Sotheby's luxury-car auction held in the resort's space-age Awakening theater-in-the-round. James Corden plays host to more than 500 invited guests, among them a number of obscenely rich car aficionados bidding for Porsches and Lamborghinis, some of which aren't even legal to drive on U.S. streets. The auctioneer is lowered from the ceiling in a gold and glass chamber, and the cars rise from beneath the floor and rotate on an illuminated platform. The star of the show is an actual Formula 1 car, the very first Mercedes that seven-time champion Hamilton ever drove. The car is undriveable, save for on a special track and only with a service agreement with the Mercedes F1 team to keep it operational. Bidding goes on for more than a half hour.

Eventually only two bidders remain, one who sits among us in the round (who'd previously won an auction for a $52,000 handbag for his wife), and another on the phone from his private jet somewhere in the air. The final bid is $17.1 million. As I leave the theater, I overhear someone say, "I thought there was supposed to be a recession." Yeah, man, there is. This is why.

I decamp from the Wynn for Circus Circus, which is across the Strip from the Wynn geographically but on another planet financially. While the Wynn sold a $1 million package, Circus Circus is the popular spot for those looking to park an RV near the water hookups out back.

This also makes Circus Circus an ideal spot for Guy Laliberté, the co-founder of Cirque du Soleil, to set up his own RV camp. Down in the shadow of the towering and brightly lit Circus Circus and Resorts World signs, in a thicket of shrubs and trees, Laliberté assembled "Frooogs Camp," his own personal mobile village of hand-painted RVs, which he takes to Black Rock City, Nevada, for Burning Man each year. This weekend, Frooogs Camp is here because Laliberté is also famous for throwing what he calls "the one don't-miss party for Formula 1." His exclusive invite-only events host celebrities, political leaders, and drivers themselves in cities all across the globe, from the storied Jimmy'z nightclub in Monaco to his private estate in Montreal.

Rihanna and A$AP Rocky were just two of the many celebrities roaming through the paddock on race day.



Sotheby's hosted a luxury-car auction, and the first Mercedes F1 driven by Lewis Hamilton was the star.

Some of the drivers, including George Russell, Sergio "Checo" Pérez, and Lewis Hamilton, before the parade.

For Laliberté, this weekend is decades in the making. In the Nineties, Formula 1's then-CEO Bernie Ecclestone asked Laliberté to look into the prospect of bringing Formula 1 to Vegas. "Bernie back then didn't really either think about or believe in the American market," Laliberté says.

I swing by Frooogs Camp on my way to go see Jack Harlow at the Cosmopolitan, making my way down a winding trail to find a circus-style tent circled by RVs and food trucks. Inside the tent, hundreds of Laliberté's friends and family sit at tables around a stage, whooping it up for carnival-style performers. A man named Brett Loudermilk swallows swords (and flirts with doing the same to the largest dildo I've ever seen); a woman named Anna Silva holds her leg next to her head while her husband Alfredo throws daggers into the wall all around her; a burlesque dancer named Banbury Cross pours champagne down her bare body then sinks to the ground to lick it up from the floor. The crowd rises to their feet and cheer her on with vigor. Jack Harlow, eat your fucking heart out. I stick around.

"I kind of use this camp to test ideas and provoke a little colorful environment in this city of light," Laliberté says. "I like to be a little misfit in this environment."

Laliberté is the perfect person to talk to about F1's American gambit. Once a Québécois street performer, he's brought a European-style of entertainment to U.S. audiences, and not in the usual places like New York or Chicago. It was here in Vegas that Cirque du Soleil's seed found its purchase. Starting with the show *Mystére* in 1993, Cirque du Soleil grew over the next 30 years to dominate the Vegas entertainment industry once defined by lounge acts and comedians, and became a billion-dollar enterprise.

"It's part of the ethos of Vegas to go and get those big events," he says. "They're trying everything. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't."

BACK AT THE TRACK, the sound of the hydraulic drills reaches a crescendo as the teams prepare the cars for qualifying. Outside the paddock building, Formula 1 had built a structure housing a pop-up MGM casino complete with slot machines and a roulette table, as well as a wedding chapel named Race to the Altar, where a ceremony is currently underway. "We've legally married two couples here in the paddock," says Elvis impersonator and wedding officiant Brian Mills, before donning his shades and performing "Love Me Tender" for the bride and groom.

But the mood turns serious. One by one, drivers exit their team's offices and cross over to their garages. Drivers for top teams like Red Bull and Mercedes are accosted by media and fans. Hamilton, by far the sport's biggest star, sprints to his garage, an intense stare fixed on his face.

Amid all of the driver fanfare, a crowd has formed around Will Buxton, with

Members of Cirque du Soleil get ready in the pit lane before their performance.

fans mugging for selfies and autographs. The on-air commentator for F1 TV, Buxton has become a celebrity on par with the drivers thanks to his role in *Drive to Survive*. I ask him about his thoughts on the Las Vegas Grand Prix. "I think the scale of what they've achieved, this pit building, for example, is one of the most impressive I've ever seen in Formula 1. The most important thing to factor into all of this is it's Year One," he says. He thinks that Las Vegas is the perfect next step for F1. "The whole city feels like it's a fan zone because that's just Vegas normally. It's a massive adult playground. It feels like a theme park anyway.

"Whether you're someone that's loved racing your whole life or someone that's just got into it through watching Netflix, one thing I've loved about racing my whole life is it always felt like a community, something niche. And now this niche is big."

In the East Harmon Fan Zone, I mingle with fans from all over, a sampling of this growing club. A couple of young women from Dallas who only got into F1 this year: "Well, I really like the cars. They're like a small rocket." A couple from L.A. who got hooked on *Drive to Survive* in 2020: "I've watched every race for the last three years." A father and son from New York who frequent Vegas but have never been to an F1 race: "We're on the last turn coming into the street, so it's cool seeing the cars whip down that last turn. You get the different smells of rubber and the sparks."

As I make my way through the crowd to watch the final qualifying race, I hear the name "Checo" chanted. That's the nickname of Sergio Pérez, Red Bull's other driver alongside world champion Max Verstappen. Pérez is a native of Mexico, and a six-time Grand Prix champ, but he's second fiddle to his teammate, who drives the same car but finishes far ahead of him week after week. Still, this is southern Nevada. Pérez enjoys the same thing Mexican boxer Canelo Álvarez does when he comes to Las Vegas for a fight: a friendly crowd. I'm surrounded by a group of fans in Red Bull shirts who demand I yell "Checo number one!" I oblige.

But Checo does not finish number one. He finishes a disappointing 12th, not even good enough to get in the final qualifying session. The home-field favorite will have a lot of ground to make up tomorrow starting from 11th place. His teammate, the unstoppable Verstappen, will start in second, behind Ferrari's Charles Leclerc. As people make their way out of the grandstands, I hear cries of "Anybody but Max!"

"The whole city feels like a fan zone … that's Vegas normally. It's an adult playground."

SUNSET PARK is a large and bucolic public park southeast of the Vegas airport. As I wander through it on race day, about 200 members of the Mongols motorcycle gang gather for a picnic, their bikes lined up as far as the eye can see. In the pavilion next to the Mongol party is the event I'm here for: a group of European motorsport fans gathered for a pre-race barbecue. Welcome to Las Vegas, mates.

The host, Andy Austin, owns a condo in the MGM Signature, and when he noticed his terrace overlooked the track, he thought about renting his place out for the weekend for $22,000, since he wasn't an F1 fan: "Because I don't know how to bet on it," he explains. But when he realized his European friends and colleagues were interested, he extended an invitation. "We have the perfect spot for this. We are looking on seats that go for a thousand bucks per day," says Remco Sonderen, who's here from Amsterdam.

"Everything in Vegas is bigger. I wouldn't necessarily say better, but it's bigger, more extroverted. So the race is also more of a show," Sonderen says. "Americans are more competitive. You are raised 'Be the best you can be.' And in Europe, we say, '*Doe Normaal,*' just do normal. Try your best to see where your limits are. And if you reach that limit, then you know where you are." [*Cont. on 80*]

The Hollywood Adventures of Balenciaga's Fire Starter

After a storm of controversy, Demna wants to move forward with his singular vision for the iconic luxury fashion house

By Nathan Taylor Pemberton ▶ Photographs by Tanima Mehrotra

BALENCIAGA

Balenciaga creative director Demna says the principal aim of his fashions is "creating desire."

IT WAS A PERFECT Hollywood afternoon. There was sun, a slight breeze, and some of the most famous faces on the planet. And for Demna Gvasalia, there was fear.

The Balenciaga creative director has proven himself one of the most adept and blunt bottlers of our zeitgeist for the past decade, and his artistic interpretations are among the most polarizing and debated in fashion. It's perhaps understandable then that after the brand's first Los Angeles show in its 105-year history, he was "very afraid" to talk to the locals.

"What if they were like, 'Oh, that's how you see what's going on here?' " Demna says.

We're sitting in a sunlit corner of the mega mansion he's been working out of since coming to the city from Paris a few days ago. It's a little less than 24 hours after the show, and Demna's wearing his own designs, as he always does – Balenciaga hotel slippers in royal blue, baggy denim camo pants, a hoodie bearing the tagline of Balenciaga's latest ad campaign, "Be Different." Perched next to him is his husband, Loïk Gomez, who goes by the name BFRND and composes the music for Balenciaga's shows, in a red McDonald's T-shirt and oversize Homer Simpson slippers, nodding attentively as we chat.

"But all the people I spoke with from here told me they completely related to it," Demna says. "I can say it was a good response."

BFRND adds, "They also talked a lot about shopping. All the people I talked to after the show were like, 'Oh, my God. Let's go shopping!' "

"It was very much about creating desire," Demna continues. "And I think that's all I want."

On this morning, the 42-year-old designer appears at ease and somewhat amused by the immediate response to his fall collection. He has been calling it "a celebration," or as he says this afternoon, a "love letter," to the city. Los Angeles holds a special resonance for the brand. Given founder Cristóbal Balenciaga's legacy in shaping Hollywood's golden era of couture, along with Demna's role in modernizing the visual lingua franca of streetwear (plus his hand in outfitting a new generation of hypercelebrity), it's a homecoming that's been a century in the making.

It's also one of Demna's first visits back to the U.S. after a year of controversy. The troubles began with a pair of Balenciaga editorials at the end of 2022. One featured children holding teddy bears clad in what looked like bondage gear, and a second included documents referencing a child-pornography court case. The images unleashed a fierce hysteria, with the internet vowing to #CancelBalenciaga.

The CEO of Balenciaga parent company Kering, François-Henri Pinault, called the campaigns an "error of judgment." Kim Kardashian, the most visible wearer of Balenciaga on the planet, released a statement saying the images had left her "shaken," adding that she was "reevaluating" her relationship with the brand.

At the end of 2022, Kering fourth-quarter sales had dropped by an eye-popping seven percent, and Balenciaga's impressive sales growth, which had soared to 2.5 billion euros that same year, seemingly stalled, according to luxury-market analysts. (The company doesn't offer specifics on its specialty houses like Balenciaga.)

Following the flap, Demna offered penance for his misdeeds. In an interview with *Vogue,* he called the campaign "a huge and stupid mistake" and vowed to focus on the "craft" of making clothes. He swore to ease up on playing games with his audience, promising to pivot away from the aesthetic populism that defined his career. "I'm not interested in pop culture, to be very honest," he said, surprisingly. "I cannot say that my creative vision or approach to design has been influenced by it." And then he staged a stately and modest-ish Paris couture show in March, which he then admitted to not really liking.

Writer NATHAN TAYLOR PEMBERTON *covers fashion and politics. This is his first story for* ROLLING STONE.

Demna's husband goes by the name BFRND and composes music for Balenciaga's shows.

It was a surprising about-face. Since his appointment as Balenciaga's creative director in 2015, Demna (who prefers to be called by his first name) has injected a kind of grimy – and cheeky – hyperrealism into everything he designs. *The New Yorker* has called him a "button-pushing impresario," which accurately describes the pressure he exerts on culture. Though, I would add he's a *playful* button-pushing impresario. The kind who can both baffle civilian onlookers and enrage high-fashion gatekeepers while turning the rest of us into excited obsessives, even if we can't quite articulate why. Maybe it's his ability to acknowledge directly, without breaking into a laugh, that style is, at its core, a game, and that the adults who want to join in his spectacle must embrace play. Albeit a game for the economic select who can shell out for $1,800 Lay's potato-chip clutches, $4,800 padded bathrobes, $1,780 trash-bag purses made of calfskin, or 95-cent Ikea bags transformed into $2,000 totes.

"I don't want to give people a proposition that makes them look rich or powerful," Demna announced last March in the show notes. "My fashion works from down-up and not up-down."

Instead of following this conceit, one of the most unique propositions in luxury fashion, it's not totally clear what Demna is after with yesterday's show. Is he here to reassert his marketability? Calm the shaken A-listers? It's all as clear as a desert mirage.

As we talk, it's evident that his ambitions have been dialed back (or reined in). It's simpler for him now, or at least he'd like us to believe so. Demna is in the desert to create desire. "This is the main priority for us in what I do," he tells me. "I want someone to be like, 'I want to wear that immediately.' "

WHILE IT MAY be understandable, it should be concerning that the world's most controversial designer wouldn't want any more controversy. But where better to conduct a reset than in L.A., the land of reinvention and image rehab?

The city, critic Thom Andersen once noted, is "a fat target for outsiders." It's not surprising that Demna, who came of age in the upheaval of post-Soviet Georgia, would find it an alluring target. He tells me that when he first began putting together the ideas for this fall collection, he realized he was making a collection for Los Angeles. The visual references for the designs were mostly paparazzi shots – people running out of grocery stores, yoga studios, weaving through parking lots, and Justin Bieber. "He was like 20 percent of our mood board," Demna says.

Upon arriving in L.A. from Paris, his second home, Demna went to Erewhon, the upscale market turned cultural meme. He'd decided weeks ago that the store would be a central component of his new collection after his team lobbied him hard on the idea of Erewhon as the ur-symbol of L.A. frivolousness. It would be his "replacement" for the Hollywood sign in his collection, even though Demna had never actually been to an Erewhon before.

He lights up as he tells me about his first visit. Particularly, his encounter with the store's wall of liquids, which is spread out like a vast bodega display of Erewhon's signature juices, mineral waters, sparkling waters, millennial-branded sodas, and organic blends. "Everything was so effortlessly and perfectly arranged. I'm a bit of a pain in the ass. I love things to be a certain way. I don't want anybody to touch my books," he says. Demna goes on to tell me how a customer in the store mistook him for an Erewhon employee, thanks to his all-black outfit. "This girl asked me where some, I don't know, a spice was. I loved it. I fit in for once!"

Demna's first visit to Los Angeles was two decades ago, back in 2003, when he came to conduct research for a project. A true European, he'd assumed he could navigate the city without a car. "I realized I was really fucked. Getting around was going to be a nightmare," he says. "But I immediately fell somehow in love with it. I was like, 'Oh, I know that image. It's very Warholian.' "

He had, for years, fed himself on this image. It was a constant in what he's described as a traumatic childhood, one in which he became a refugee following Russian-backed ethnic violence in his hometown. As early as the age of 10, Demna was buying "trashy magazines" about Hollywood celebrities and gorging himself on heavy metal coming out of the city's music scene. He tells me about his fascination with the "blue tone" seen in films made here in the Nineties, about "sexy girls," about filmmaker David Lynch, and the *Fast and the Furious* franchise, which he counts as one of his favorites.

FOR THE SHOW, Demna had selected a quiet neighborhood in central Los Angeles. The 500 block of South Windsor Boulevard perfectly aligns with the Hollywood sign, which looms above in the distant hills. To create the runway for an outdoor fashion

Balenciaga's first-ever show in Los Angeles was packed with celebrities — everyone from Lil Wayne (top) to Kim Kardashian (middle) was there for the presentation, which took place on a quiet block in the shadow of the Hollywood sign. Fans (bottom) lined up outside the event.

show, circles of security were arranged throughout the neighborhood like an occupational force.

At precisely 1:15 in the afternoon, the first tall, angular models marched down a cracked concrete street clutching various tokens of life in the city: leather coffee cups, iPhones with Airpods, shopping bags filled with wilting produce.

There were other tokens of city life, too: the full-spectrum of celebrity wildlife. Kim Kardashian, wearing skin-tone lace leggings and a hoodie, was there with her sister Kendall Jenner, who wore a black gown. In a bit of brand continuity, Balenciaga's former billboard star Cardi B walked the show in a chemical-blue fuzzy coat. There was Nicole Kidman, who announced a partnership with Balenciaga that day, along with Salma Hayek, married to Kering CEO Pinault, and reality-television star Lisa Rinna. I was hot-boxed by Lil Wayne, who chain-smoked blunts and sat next to the rapper 2 Chainz. In front of me was longtime Demna stan A$AP Ferg paying close attention to every look. Afterward, I ran across Sexxy Red, who clutched a wad of cash in her hand as an accessory.

There were two-piece yoga sets covered with bomber jackets – all ballasted by Balenciaga's mech-warrior-size 10XL trainers. These alien layers, a Demna hallmark, felt like rational responses to the brutal conditions (economic, social, ecological) unique to Los Angeles.

However, Demna's POV of life in L.A., and perhaps America beyond it, appears to be a contemptuous one. He sent out models wearing distressed velour tracksuits in shades of bubblegum pink and neon green and pastel yellow. To amplify the Juicy Couture-ness, Demna paired the looks with towering faux-fur boots reminiscent of Uggs. An animal-print coat, with hand-distressed needle work, was paired with hotel slippers, baggy jeans, and an Erewhon purse. It could've been mistaken for the thrown-together uniform of a narcotized nepo baby emerging from Chateau Marmont for an emergency supply run.

Prerecorded sounds of traffic poured onto a trafficless street. Demna works closely with his husband, BFRND, to curate the sounds for a Balenciaga show, which are as reference-laden as the collection on the runway. BFRND generally keeps the music in a familiar Euro-club zone – driven by beefy geometric percussion and icy synths. There's a friendly goth menace to his sounds, too, which he describes to me as "overstimulating." For Saturday's event, BFRND wrote and recorded more than 50 voice-overs of faux advertisements for juice cleanses and being one's best self. The saccharine energy clashed with the ravaged-looking models careening down the street.

Demna says he's "obsessed" with advertising, particularly U.S. commercials. To most American ears, recontextualizing ads is almost always an irony-laden exercise. A friend texted me after the show to say the voice-overs were "so dark." Demna insists "irony" is never present in his designs or his shows. In fact, he considers the word a "negative term," one that shuts down conversations about the work.

Cardi B (top), who has modeled for Balenciaga, was at the show, along with Nicole Kidman (middle, with Kering CEO François-Henri Pinault), who recently announced a partnership with the brand. Rapper Sexxy Red (bottom) was there, wearing a black horn headband and carrying around cash as an accessory.

He insists his aim for the show was ultimately utopian. "This was a naive proposition of how it could have been also in the ideal world," he says.

I tell him I felt a low hum of anxiety during the show. He appears confused. "In a good way?" he asks. I tell him that it's probably good to be provoked in some kind of way. He appears to agree: "OK, good. We don't want people to fall asleep."

WHEN I ASK Demna about his relationship with America today – after everything – he says it's "more powerful than it has ever been," and crosses his legs and stares out at the pool in the backyard. Then he describes how "tricky" social media and the internet can be. "We need to learn how to use these digital tools," he says. "I think American culture is the biggest player in that. I'm a bit scared of the fact that these digital tools are completely out of control. They can become very toxic and very dangerous. And vice versa, it starts to direct the cultures."

Of course, another thing directing the culture in Los Angeles, specifically, is Demna himself. Encountering the Balenciaga superfans at the show and at the Rodeo Drive store afterward, it was clear Demna's trip to Hollywood was a rare kind of ouroboros moment for him, a connecting of a large cultural loop. Throughout our conversation, Demna explains that L.A. has always been the source code for his thinking. An element that had created him, and that he had, in turn, evolved.

I had come to Hollywood to see fashion's foremost edgelord rummage through this cultural megastore and reinterpret the city's capacity for alienation and superficiality and mythmaking. But looking at it from a distance, it seems Demna, who can always find the sublime in the grotesque, came to Hollywood to get lost in the city's alienating sprawl.

This instinct to seek refuge in L.A.'s weirdness might not make sense if we see Demna strictly as a visionary charting out our zeitgeist – even more, as the creative director of a massive corporate luxury house. But for Demna, the man, who felt at home among the staffers at Erewhon, it's something else: profoundly human and painfully relatable.

Outside, a small fleet of black SUVs has pulled into the expansive driveway. Demna and his husband have to catch a flight back to Paris and then on to home in Geneva. Before leaving, Demna walks back over to ask me why I think Los Angeles gets a bad rap. He asks in a way that is curious, bordering on incredulous.

He listens attentively, brightening when I mention the city's endless sprawl and its traffic. He tells me how much he loves traffic jams because they give him a chance to disconnect. Even more, he loves the drive-thrus throughout the city. Have I used the drive-thru at Starbucks, he asks excitedly. Demna, for once, sounds like he's at home. "They're everywhere!" he says. "I never knew I needed a Starbucks drive-thru until I came to L.A." ®

JESUS, TAKE THE DIAL

Why is the radio so full of Christian rock? You can largely thank the Educational Media Foundation, the little-known nonprofit taking the devil's music off the air

BY KATIE THORNTON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GUILLEM CASASÚS

ON THE AIR

LOOKING OUT THE studio window of the radio station where she'd worked for 29 years, DJ "Mistress Carrie" Sarao could see a crowd gathering outside. It was a Friday night, Feb. 21, 2020, and freezing, but that didn't stop hundreds of Bostonians from flooding the parking lot when they heard the news. There was no invitation, just an impulse, an impromptu meetup of loved ones known and unknown. At midnight, the city would lose its last rock radio station.

Debuting in 1970, WAAF helped launched the careers of local bands like Aerosmith and Godsmack, and put national groups like Shinedown on the map. To many listeners, the station was as much a part of Boston as Fenway Park and clam chowder. WAAF was, Mistress Carrie's longtime colleague and fellow WAAF DJ Mike Hsu told me, a "local Massachusetts club of troublemakers and assholes." At big rock concerts, chants of "'AAF! 'AAF!" were as common as feedback. Sometimes WAAF loyalists would come to blows with devotees of their one-time competitor – rock station WBCN – before the latter went off the air in 2009. For Mistress Carrie, a 51-year-old, purple-haired rock evangelist, WAAF was the soundtrack to her adolescence, as it had been for so many other Bostonians.

In the days leading up to the end, the mood at WAAF was somewhere between hospice care and a rowdy Irish Catholic wake. Old friends flooded in; listeners called with high-octane send-offs; Aerosmith's Tom Hamilton stopped by to pay tribute. But as the clock ticked toward midnight, there was a quiet in the on-air studio. Mistress Carrie's voice broke as she told her listeners to keep their heads high, shoulders back, and horns up. "We're goin' out proud," she said. "Because we were all part of something special."

"It was awesome," Hsu replied solemnly.

Six minutes before midnight, Mistress Carrie and Hsu taunted the soon-to-be owners of their beloved station.

"There's only one way to go," Mistress Carrie said.

"Loud," Hsu stated.

"In your face," replied Mistress Carrie.

"Evil," Hsu declared authoritatively.

Crackling in the background was the soft but ominous sound of rain falling and church bells ringing – the iconic opening of Black Sabbath's 1970 track "Black Sabbath." The song was "handcrafted, especially chosen" for "the segue into the new format," according to Hsu – intended, Mistress Carrie told me, to "inject as much satanism in the airwaves as possible before we flipped the switch."

"Wherever you are," Mistress Carrie implored her listeners, her voice breaking, "roll your windows down!"

"Crank it up!" yelled Hsu.

"One last time, baby!" Mistress Carrie spat out, before screaming a chant that had rung through Boston's rock scene for half a century.

"'AAF! 'AAF!" she yelled, with Hsu joining in. About 150 current and former employees, crammed into the adjacent office space, opened the door to join in. Their chanting voices filled the airwaves. "'AAF! 'AAF!" With their final song growing louder, the DJs faded out the mics and closed the studio door. "And [we] sat there with our headphones on," Mistress Carrie says, "and cried."

Perfectly timed by Hsu and Mistress Carrie, the song ended at midnight, when an engineer came in and flipped a switch, ending WAAF's transmission once and for all. In the studio, all was silent save for the tears of Mistress Carrie and Hsu.

Listeners, though, heard something else: the impersonal dawning of a new era. There was no flashy sign-on, no new local DJ to take the reins as the frequency changed hands. The new owners couldn't be bothered to tip their hat to their new Boston audience with a shout-out or a song by a local artist. Instead, they just punched into their automated playlist, which emanates via satellite to hundreds of radio stations across the country, fading in midsong. With the signature clean production and contemplative, easy pace of Christian rock, artist Jeremy Camp's 2006 track "Let It Fade" invited listeners to be saved, to find new life. WAAF had just become the latest casualty in a string of radio stations all over the country, all lost to a massive but little-known nonprofit called the Educational Media Foundation.

If you've ever wondered why it seems like every other station on your dial is Christian rock, EMF is a big part of your answer. From its headquarters in a Nashville suburb (the organization is slowly relocating from its longtime home of California), EMF plays the generic sounds of contemporary Christian music, or "CCM." It is a genre that everyone from artists and critics to church leaders have decried as being somewhere between "the absolute worst" and "doctrinally unsound." But the Educational Media Foundation has quietly become the country's fastest-growing radio chain and second-largest station owner in the country, bested only by iHeartRadio. With hundreds of cookie-cutter stations branded as "K-LOVE," as well as its smaller chain of "Air1" stations, EMF broadcasts on more than 1,000 signals across all 50 states and some U.S. territories, reaching an estimated 18 million listeners a week.

On the surface, EMF's broadcasts are glaringly apolitical. They opt instead for their trite brand of Christian rock, all teed off by the same, small cast of nationally syndicated, Anywhere-USA DJs who smile through everything from squeaky-clean jokes about the drink sizes at Starbucks to prayers asking God to watch over those who have donated to the organization. But behind its politically neutral facade, the organization – and the CCM industry more broadly – appears to be an inherently conservative project. Many right-wing Christian culture bearers have long believed in the "Breitbart Doctrine" – the idea that, to change politics, you must first change culture – and have fought for decades to build a parallel popular culture free of sharp edges, hard questions, or representations of lives that veer from the straight and narrow. The world of CCM, in turn, "reflects the values of the religious right," says religious-studies historian Leah Payne, by providing "suburban families with safe Christian listening experiences in the car." And while EMF stations may not have the "attention-getting, rage-inducing content" of an explicitly political outlet like Fox News, she says, "K-LOVE is the softer side of that conservatism."

Today, the organization's nationwide network of radio stations plays mostly white, male artists. Though it professes to broadcast "Christian music," it largely steers clear of genres like religious rap or gospel, as well as any Christian rock that grapples too heavily with doubt or hardship. Christian artists who have wavered in their faith have quietly been dropped from EMF's playlists; several queer Christian artists have lost work and airtime on CCM radio after coming out. (Through a representative, EMF declined to be interviewed for this story and did not respond to requests for comment.)

While EMF stations may not have the "rage-inducing content" of an outlet like Fox News, says historian Leah Payne, they are "the softer side of that conservatism."

But EMF's story isn't just about bad music taking over the airwaves in service of a cultural vision that is overwhelmingly white, straight, and artistically regressive. It's also the story of the near-demise of local radio – a longtime haven for new music, artistic outcasts, and political dialogue – at the hands of a tax-avoiding not-for-profit organization that appears to operate like a very-much-for-profit media mega-corporation. For decades, EMF has hidden behind a veneer of uncoolness while honing a signature technique: At big commercial stations and small, beloved community-radio stations alike, they've offered the owners an undeniable sum of money, wiped out the local presence, and replaced it with unmanned transmitters. Almost every new EMF station operates as a repeater with no local voices, few local jobs, and barely any overhead.

As of 2022, the little-known organization had just shy of a billion dollars in net assets (a number that grows steadily year after year), with an annual revenue of nearly a quarter billion. (National Public Radio, by comparison, had net assets of less than $150 million, and operated near the break-even mark.) In 2021, EMF's then-CEO Bill Reeves made a cool $770,000 a year – well over what NPR's CEO made that year. (Compensation data for EMF's current CEO, Todd Woods, has yet to be released.) And listeners are the primary ones paying that salary: Ninety-seven cents of every dollar the organization makes comes directly from listeners' pockets. EMF's on-air hosts repeatedly hound their sometimes hard-up listeners for money, often several times in an hour. With few operating costs, each new station quickly

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becomes a vehicle for new donations. While other radio companies sell off signals and struggle to keep advertisers, nonprofit EMF has built an unassuming money-making machine.

In the WAAF studio that last fateful night, some staff were feeling whiplash. Just three years earlier, Hsu watched as the station he grew up with, Brown University's WBRU in Providence, Rhode Island, was choked off the air in an EMF buyout. WAAF program director Joe Calgaro, sitting next to Hsu, had his longtime dream of working at his hometown rock station – the Loop, in Chicago – pulled out from under him when EMF bought it in 2018 for $21.5 million. In the case of Boston's WAAF, the organization paid more than $10 million for the signal.

Instead of new rock bands and a few classic standbys, listeners in the Boston area can now hear a small and frustratingly catchy playlist of guitar-driven worship songs, interspersed with promotions for EMF apps that allow you to listen everywhere – "even the Chili's parking lot!"

"They might not ever say it out loud," says Mistress Carrie, "but you can't tell me there isn't a little bit of pride that K-LOVE is taking the devil's music off the radio and buying rock stations out."

According to an interview with recent CEO Reeves on a Christian-radio website, EMF's "signal expansion" team sits down together every 10 days to continue plotting its growth. The group of engineers, executives, and money guys look at stations that might be vulnerable to a buyout, and hatch plans. And EMF built its kingdom by expertly exploiting loopholes that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) put in place to help small nonprofits and try to keep the broadcast spectrum from falling to those with the deepest pockets. In 2018, former EMF CEO Mike Novak told a radio-industry magazine that "in my own heart, I know God was involved" in the decision to form a 501(c)(3), "because being a not-for-profit has paid off for us many, many times."

To Mistress Carrie, it didn't feel fair. When it comes to music radio, she says, "they're playing on a completely separate set of rules than everybody else."

IN 1978, BOB Anthony Fogal was working his dream job as a DJ at KFRC, a San Francisco rock and Top 40 station that had been named *Billboard*'s Station of the Year four times in a row. But Fogal, 28 years old with a bright smile, iconically Seventies big-frame glasses, and a slightly shaggy beard, was also a recent convert to evangelical Christianity – and he was feeling unexpectedly unfulfilled. Sitting in his office, he scrawled an idea on a yellow pad of paper: "Christian KFRC?!" At the time, a lot of Christian radio was still fringe: sharp-tongued preachers from small-town churches prophesying about the end times. And while Fogal may have personally embraced this kind of religiosity, he had something else in mind for his radio station. He wanted to reach the masses. "No Christian-ese," he wrote on the paper with a bold underline.

Two years later, Fogal went public with his effort, forming the nonprofit that would soon be known as the Educational Media Foundation. They ran ads in the local paper with open invitations for anyone wishing to discuss the creation of a new Christian-music radio station. They held early-morning prayer gatherings and film screenings, raising money by charging $5 a head. It wasn't easy, but it was his calling: Fogal, who had been living a plush life in Marin County, would come to sell many of his belongings to make his vision come to life.

By 1982, Fogal and his followers had scraped together enough to buy an FM station that had belonged to a bankrupt church in Santa Rosa, California. On the Educational Media Foundation's flagship station, Fogal bucked Christian-radio convention by almost exclusively playing music – all optimistic and Jesus-tinged. Though leaders of local churches scoffed, some audience members were so moved that they wanted to do more than listen. Volunteers put on concerts, created a newsletter, held an annual auction, helped solicit donations, and rallied listeners to pray for more frequencies.

Their prayers were answered by Army-disciplined pop-radio DJ Dick Jenkins, who came in as general manager in 1986. Jenkins rebranded the flagship station and began using the slogan "Positive and Encouraging: K-LOVE" – which the organization still uses today. It started negotiating buyouts – often with small, struggling Christian radio stations. New stations rebroadcasting K-LOVE sprung up around Northern California, and eventually in some small towns and midsize cities throughout the country. With Jenkins at the helm, EMF's chain of near-identical stations grew steadily throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

As the company built its broadcast network, one business decision proved to be peculiarly prescient: the choice to incorporate as a "not-for-profit" entity. Not only did that status let it avoid paying tax, it also gave EMF several legs up in the radio world. It allowed the organization to take advantage of long-held FCC policies intended to keep the radio dial from being sold to the highest bidder, such as waiving application costs and other fees for nonprofits due to their inherently "limited funding." EMF also made use of a federal policy that let new nonprofit stations opt out of the requirement of having a local broadcast studio. Furthermore, EMF could legally get donations from listeners – a revenue stream commercial stations don't have at their disposal. For EMF, "it was just a matter of expansion," says Todd Urick, a radio engineer and community-radio advocate in Los Angeles County. By the early 2000s, the nonprofit had well over 50 radio stations and was bringing in around $25 million in donations annually.

In 2003, EMF leveled up again. That spring, the FCC set aside a week in which radio organizations could apply for radio "translators" – in essence, small repeater stations that rebroadcast a parent station into an area that the original signal couldn't reach. Translators are a fraction of the price of new stations, and were easily available to nonprofit broadcasters like colleges, public radio stations, and community and religious broadcasters. After that March week in 2003, Urick was sifting through the FCC's digital database to see who had applied. "EMF," he says, "was a major filer of these translators." In fact, the organization had applied for nearly 900 translator stations across the country, including coveted signals in big cities. They'd get approved for more than 250. With an explosion of new translators broadcasting Christian music, EMF soared: By 2006, the nonprofit more than quadrupled its assets, to more than $80 million; by the end of that year, EMF was the world's largest broadcaster of contemporary Christian music.

But perhaps most disturbing of all is that, from the beginning, EMF's nonprofit status has let it access a gold mine of frequencies: the storied "left of the dial." The FCC has long reserved the lower FM band – from 88.1 to 91.9 – for exclusive use by groups including colleges, community and public-

radio organizations, and tribes. It's the stuff of subcultural legend, and the inspiration for the Replacements' 1985 ode to college radio, "Left of the Dial." With big, commercial entities banned from bidding on these signals, the FCC imagined that small nonprofits could access them. But with a giant like EMF still entitled to these frequencies, small organizations have found it hard to compete: In 2015, listeners and staff at a classical public-radio station in South Florida couldn't raise enough to buy back their frequency after it was sold to EMF. In 2017, not even a media-savvy campaign led by current and former Brown University radio staffers could keep the frequency out of EMF's hands. And in 2018, EMF bought Shaw University's signal, which had been the first public-radio station owned by an HBCU; the more than 2,000 signatures on Change.org weren't even a hiccup. Even as EMF grew into a giant, it still reaped the benefits designed to give small nonprofits a fighting chance on the radio dial.

If you ask Urick, EMF has also been a behind-the-scenes bully. He says he has "run into several cases" where EMF has made small engineering changes that have "practically no effect" on EMF's reach, but limit a nearby community broadcaster's coverage – or keep an organization that was hoping to get a new station from getting on the air. Like in 2013, when the nonprofit punk fanzine *Razorcake* applied for a tiny Los Angeles-area FM station on the same signal as an EMF translator down in Orange County, and EMF barraged it with complaints about potential interference. "It was kind of like the NFL going after a peewee team," says zine editor Todd Taylor. "They were just trying to bury us in paperwork." (Full disclosure: I was interviewed by *Razorcake* last year and worked in community radio many years ago.) Urick also says that, over the years, he has watched EMF buy up multiple translators in the same city – doubling, sometimes tripling up their coverage. "They hoard [signals] where they don't even need them, where they're extremely redundant." And that, Urick says, takes away potential signals from community-radio hopefuls.

In cities and small towns alike, EMF moves in like a ghost – almost imperceptible but ever-present – with virtually no local staff or local facilities, without paying the fees required of commercial radio companies, and on frequencies unavailable to the commercial networks that are, increasingly, its competitors. But when asked in 2022 about EMF's localism – or lack thereof – by Christian website HisAir.net, then-EMF CEO Reeves put it in holy context: "Well, the answer is pretty simple. That's just not what we are called to do at this time."

FROM HER SEAT behind the microphone at WAAF in the 2010s, Mistress Carrie saw EMF's K-LOVE and Air1 stations spreading to more and more frequencies. But she never saw them as a threat: "I've always said it's my opinion that the devil writes better music than God." Christian rock, she says, "was more of a punchline" for her and her colleagues.

But in the CCM industry, getting that immediately recognizable sound – however derided – has been a science. "You just can't be too heavy," says Grace Semler Baldridge, an independent Christian artist who performs as Semler and who has topped both the iTunes Christian albums and song charts. In addition to her own crop of frankly honest songs about her faith, she's done session work and built relationships with artists in the CCM industry. There, she immediately became aware of a few soft rules of the genre.

First, she says, there's a just-right spot when it comes to beats per minute – not too fast, not too slow. After BPMs, there are "JPMs," or "Jesuses per minute." While there's no hard-and-fast rule on the required number of JPMs, more tends to be better – and a reference to "Him," "God," "Father," etc., counts, Semler says. Choruses should be rife with repetition so that listeners can sing along by the second round. The guitar must be warm but just a bit bright, with a touch of drive and a long-tail reverb that hangs in the air. Most important, there's the delay, which nearly doubles the guitars' slow strums and picked melodies – a technique that Reverb.com's "The Gear, Tones, and Techniques of Modern Worship Guitar" guide says was pulled directly from U2's the Edge.

In many ways, EMF helped shape this sound over decades; one evangelical-church band member I spoke with called it "K-LOVE-ification of Christian music." With hundreds of stations rebroadcasting a single K-LOVE feed, Christian artists and record labels saw that they had a singular opportunity. Instead of shipping CDs to dozens of stations the country over, pleading with program directors for airtime, and racking up long-distance phone bills, artists and their labels had to convince just one set of people that their song was worth playing: those deciding the playlist at EMF.

In the 1980s and 1990s, K-LOVE could be heard playing Christian pop rock and crossover artists like Amy Grant. Its sister chain, Air1, focused more on Christian "alternative" music, anchored over the years by bands like dc Talk and Relient K. But over time, K-LOVE and Air1 converged on a niche in the marketplace: the rock-tinged, undoubting pop of "worship" music – "the sound of the megachurch," as Leah Payne describes it. The Christian-music business's target audience member – whom industry leaders brazenly refer to as "Becky" – is a full-time mom who desperately wants a reliably unoffensive station to play in the car while carting the kids from school to soccer. With a suburban sound, the songs are just as easily heard on Sunday morning as in the car ride to school.

While the idea that overdrive and a sizzling beat might fuel crises of faith may seem laughable, the history of Christianity's interminglings with rock is indeed a fraught one. Cliché as it is now, postwar Christian parents really were in an all-out panic about rock & roll. And for many *white* Christians, the dangers of rock & roll didn't just lie in the charisma of performers, their dripping sweat, and the promise of carnal satisfaction. Ingrained in many white evangelicals' disdain for rock was a deep-seeded, racist fear of the so-called "race-mixing" genre. In 1958, for example, while the staunch segregationist Asa Carter was leading an anti-rock & roll campaign in Birmingham, Alabama, masked members of the local KKK (who identified as Christian) sabotaged the antenna of a local "Black-oriented" radio station, cutting it down and causing outages.

But as the 1960s came to an end, the nearly unthinkable happened: Rock music and the burgeoning hippie lifestyle brought many followers to Jesus. While young, paisley-clad members of the counterculture had come to the movement seeking peace and love, many found its drug-addled displays shallow and fleeting, as their musical heroes died young and bands ended in cold-shouldered turmoil. Commodified, half-baked explorations of Eastern spirituality proved insufficient and even disillusionary for some seekers.

Many flower children found what they were looking for in Jesus – or a new branding of the guy, who suddenly seemed to bear some anachronistic similarities to the hippies themselves: hair long, clad in sandals and loose, flowing clothing, vocally opposed to the government in power, like a Galilean Jerry Garcia.

There's no set rule on how many "JPMs" — "Jesuses per minute"— a CCM song needs, but more tends to be better. References to "Him," "God," and "Father" count.

Across California, a handful of savvy men of the cloth worked with more streetwise evangelists, helping them to establish Christian "coffeehouses" – havens like the Living Room near Haight-Ashbury, or His Place on Los Angeles' Sunset Strip. Everyone from fresh-eyed teens to drying-out twentysomethings flooded in to hear folk-rock artists sing songs of praise and faith and doubt and salvation, or to sit on the floor for caffeine-fueled, come-as-you-are worship sessions that focused on Jesus' right-on teachings. Soon, popular bands were dabbling in the divine, with Norman Greenbaum's "Spirit in the Sky" proclaiming that you "gotta have a friend in Jesus," and the Byrds declaring that "Jesus is just all right with me."

In 1969, a motorcycle-riding coffeehouse regular named Larry Norman released what many critics considered to be the first Christian rock album, *Upon This Rock*. With a black ascot around his neck and piecey, blond curtain bangs fanning out over his eyebrows, looking like a hippie Gwyneth Paltrow weary from preaching on a windy street corner all day (an activity he was known to do), Norman wrote for an audience of "flower children disillusioned by the government and the church," according to the Christian Broadcasting Network.

Across the pond, meanwhile, young composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyricist Tim Rice made a rock musical based on the life of Christ and his followers; the *Jesus Christ Superstar* album beat out Carole King's *Tapestry* to be the top-selling record of 1971. That year, a pop-art-style Jesus adorned the cover of *Time* magazine, with a halo of text reading "The Jesus Revolution" arcing about the prophet's head. The "Jesus Freaks" had arrived.

Many in the mainstream church found this new, pop-culture Jesus and his freewheeling followers blasphemous. But some religious leaders were willing to play the long game with these unlikely seekers, including the prominent evangelical minister Billy Graham, who preached God's love at rock concerts. In 1972, Graham's youth-oriented group Campus Crusade hosted a six-day event known as Explo '72 and often regarded as the "Christian Woodstock." Eighty thousand high school and college-aged hippie-types flooded Dallas for prayer sessions and seminars on how to evangelize before enjoying evening performances by the likes of Norman (who would soon release his pointed song "Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?"), plus special performances by Johnny Cash and Kris Kristofferson.

While many people saw Explo '72 as the organic culmination of the "Jesus Freak" movement, many critics have since regarded it as something else: the moment when conservative evangelical leaders finally figured out how to begin to bend youth culture to their will. For many aging flower children, the music-driven ministry provided an easy path into the mainstream church – and the budding CCM industry. By the late 1970s, the genre's rebellious roots had been excised, and "contemporary Christian music," increasingly conservative in style and substance, even had its own *Billboard* charts.

This was the world in which EMF founder Bob Anthony Fogal had the idea for his "Christian KFRC." Like Graham and the holy men who helped shape the coffeehouse movement from behind the scenes, Fogal embraced the attitude that Christian music should meet people where they're at, even if that means playing increasingly vapid, quasi-religious music. "No Christian-ese" remained a guiding principle.

It's a strategy that has been central to Christian pop ever since: Use the music and aesthetic of the counterculture to ease followers' transition into mainline evangelicalism – and build a quietly conservative wing of modern life by making CCM mainstream. "Christian contemporary music," says Payne, "is an effort to shape the world through popular culture." CCM was useful in other ways, too: The music helped keep young people coming back. "It was," says Payne, "about keeping church children in the church."

ON K-LOVE TODAY, you won't hear any explicit politicking. You didn't in the early days, either. For one thing, its nonprofit status means it can't legally engage in any political campaign activity. (Perhaps it was merely a coincidence when, in the 1990s, EMF applied to build a new K-LOVE station on the same frequency as a Northern California community-radio station that had programming specifically for and by lesbians – prompting outcry from the existing station.) But conservatism is, in many ways, baked into the business. Fogal had the early support of Watergate "hatchet man" turned evangelical political commentator Chuck Colson. Over the years, EMF staff have donated primarily to conservative PACs. And though he was no longer involved with the company at the time, Fogal said in a 2022 interview that EMF was more necessary than ever, and that its enormity gave it "tremendous opportunities to impact our culture and even affect the direction of our country back towards God." In the United States today, he asserted, "good is being called evil and vice versa. Evil is not just operating behind the scenes, it's right there in our faces. Lawlessness. Post-term abortions. You name it." ("Post-term abortions," it should be noted, are not a thing.) Fogal went on to criticize his local Spokane City Council for allegedly underfunding the police while spending money on "Gay Pride-themed murals."

Despite the apolitical front, the CCM industry has a major anti-LGBTQ problem. "I went to this meeting with a pretty big-time CCM music manager ... and he was like, 'You gotta stop baiting K-LOVE,' " Semler Baldridge tells me with a wry grin, her cropped bleach-blond hair falling comfortably across her forehead. Semler, who is queer, has tried repeatedly to get her music on K-LOVE, but it's never happened – not even when her 2021 album, *Preacher's Kid,* topped Apple's Christian chart. While many of her songs deal with doubt and the realities of being a queer Christian – topics K-LOVE doesn't touch – some of her songs are just plain worship music: poppy, repetitive, and perfect, she says, for K-LOVE. (Semler says she tried to capture the classic CCM sound on her song "Raise Up," but "apparently it still sounded too gay.") Last year, as her song "Faith" was on its way to Number One on the iTunes Christian chart, she took to X, formerly Twitter, to ask K-LOVE if it would play the explosive single. They never gave her the time of day. "It's just so blatant, their exclusion of LGBTQ people," she says. Though EMF hasn't spoken ill of Christian artists who have come out, several queer artists have lost airtime on Christian radio after opening up about their sexuality.

Even so, Semler wishes she and other queer Christian artists could have the platform that K-LOVE would give her. "I've had some people on the inside [at EMF] that are like, 'We're affirming, we're making progress, hang tight, hold tight.' But I don't know how much I'm willing to wait for that at this stage of my life."

The more Semler dives into the mainstream world of Christian rock, the more she is turned off by it – and not just for its inability to support LGBTQ artists. She recently crashed a CCM award ceremony in Nashville called the Dove Awards. "The nicest cars I've seen in my life were at the Dove Awards," she says. "We were talking about Jesus the whole time, and I was like, 'He'd hate it here.' "

Though few and far between, other Christians have questioned the plush material conditions of industry leaders and EMF executives. In 2016, Warren Throckmorton, a retired psychology professor in Pennsylvania and evangelical blogger with a defiant streak, whose professional headshot looks straight out of *The Blues Brothers,* started blogging about red flags he heard on K-LOVE's fundraising drives. He'd never had a bone to pick with K-LOVE before: He lived within earshot of three K-LOVE stations, his wife and kids listened; as a member of his church band, he'd learned to play many of the songs at the request of his younger congregants. But Throckmorton couldn't defend the on-air hosts who praised a hard-up caller who donated to K-LOVE rather than paying an outstanding bill. And he found K-LOVE's repeated asks for an "easy gift" of $40 a month disingenuous, especially when the nationwide, syndicated hosts would "say things like, 'Help keep K-LOVE on the air in your area!' " Throckmorton recalls. "They weren't using that money to keep local stations on the air. They were using that money to buy up new stations," he says. "It seems like it is less ministry and more business."

I prod Throckmorton a bit, mentioning the things that other Christians had told me they like about the stations: the positive messages and the inspirational stories in between songs. They have pastors on staff who field prayer requests, and who privately answer calls from distraught lis- [*Cont. on 81*]

CONFESSIONS, CONSPIRACY THEORIES, AND THE HUNT FOR TUPAC'S KILLER

Why did it take decades to charge anyone in the shocking murder of the rap superstar?

By JOHN L. SMITH

Tupac Shakur
in 1993

AS

HE TOOK his sunrise walk through a quiet Las Vegas suburb of tan stucco houses and desert landscaping in late September, Duane Davis resembled nobody's idea of a gangster legend. A bald man on the soft side of 60 in a white Polo Sport T-shirt and loose-fitting pants, he could have been just another middle-aged neighbor plodding uphill against the ravages of time.

Whatever reverie Davis enjoyed ended as officers from Las Vegas Metro's Criminal Apprehension Team swiftly approached in tactical gear out of unmarked vehicles. "Hey, Keffe, Metro Police," one cop said. "Come on over here. I appreciate your cooperation, though."

Armed only with a cellphone and water bottle, Davis was the picture of compliance. He'd expected this since July, when police served a search warrant at his home seeking evidence in the 1996 murder of rap superstar Tupac Shakur. With a long criminal history, Davis knew the drill. He wondered aloud why the police hadn't brought the media with them, and even managed to quip with his captors after his hands and feet were shackled. When a cop offered to assist him into the vehicle, he declined, assuring the police, "I'm a pro."

That he is. But somehow, Duane Keith "Keffe D" Davis – major drug dealer, penitentiary veteran, and longtime South Side Compton Crips street-gang leader – has managed to talk his way into the biggest trouble of his felony-littered life.

After Davis was transferred into the back seat of a black-and-white, his uniformed police escort asked, "So what they got you for, man?"

"Oh, man," Davis replied. "The biggest case in Las Vegas history ... Sept. 7, 1996."

"Sure took 'em a while, huh?" the cop said.

"I ain't worried about it," Davis mumbled, and the officer replied, "That's what court's for, right?"

Now facing a murder charge with a gang enhancement, the self-described and self-styled "Compton street legend" is preparing for a Las Vegas trial scheduled for June 3. Delays are anticipated as two court-appointed special public defenders pore over reams of discovery and attempt to pry open metaphorically cobwebbed files in a crime that has generated multiple theories, a plethora of potential suspects, and a maze of conspiracy theories. The Sept. 28 indictment describes Davis as the murder's shot caller, and the person responsible for providing the weapon – a .40-caliber Glock – used in the Las Vegas shooting that killed Tupac and wounded Death Row Records godfather Marion "Suge" Knight.

At a press conference at Metro headquarters hours after Davis' arrest, homicide Lt. Jason Johansson cop-splained, "It wasn't until 2018 that this case was reinvigorated as additional information came to light related to this homicide, specifically Duane Davis' own admissions to his involvement in this homicide investigation that he provided to numerous media outlets." In nearly three decades, Las Vegas homicide detectives had amassed plenty of information describing Davis as the leader of the criminal conspiracy, but, Johansson said, "we never had the necessary evidence to bring this case forward."

However, the charges against Davis appear more self-inflicted than the product of dogged detective work. After years of investigative inertia, the information Las Vegas police compiled arrived all but gift-wrapped. Davis gave interviews for shows and documentaries, and even published a 2019 memoir that contains potentially incriminating excerpts placed before the Clark County grand jury. He acknowledges the existence of a 2009 federal agreement he signed in a narcotics investigation in L.A., in which he admitted his role in the Tupac shooting. His cooperation helped earn him a pass in the narcotics case, and the Tupac information couldn't be used against him – as long as he kept his mouth shut. (Through his lawyers, Davis declined to speak for this article.)

After former Los Angeles detectives wrote their own tell-all books – including one that revealed details of the agreement (known as a proffer agreement) – and appeared in documentaries, Davis made admissions in print and on-camera that could bury him in court. In the end, this was no case for Columbo.

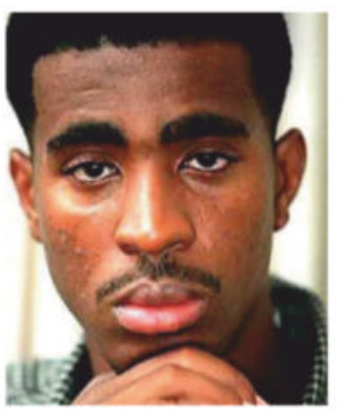
Tupac's sister, Sekyiwa Shakur, expressed relief and reticence in a statement, acknowledging the indictment as a "pivotal moment," but added that the "silence of the past 27 years surrounding this case has spoken loudly in our community. His life and death matters and should not go unsolved or unrecognized, so, yes, today is a victory, but I will reserve judgment until all the facts and legal proceedings are complete."

"We have been through decades of pain. They have known about this guy, who been running his mouth for years," Tupac's stepbrother, Mopreme Shakur, told CNN. "So why now?"

Investigators generally agree that retaliation was the prime motive for the fatal shooting, and that Davis' nephew, Orlando "Baby Lane" Anderson, was the triggerman, firing from the back seat of a white Cadillac as it pulled alongside the black 750 BMW Knight drove with Tupac inside at the intersection of Flamingo Road and Koval Lane. Tupac, Knight, and members of their entourage had beaten up Anderson earlier that night – following a boxing match at the MGM Grand – in a crime captured on a hotel surveillance camera. Anderson and his allies exacted payback, with Davis allegedly directing them and providing the murder weapon. In one of many chest-thumping lines from Davis' memoir, he writes, "We couldn't let no record company studio gangsters do us like that. Had they lost their fuckin' rappin' ass minds?"

But there are deeper intrigues to consider. Police – and even Davis – have long contended the killing of Tupac and the 1997 murder of Christopher "Notorious B.I.G." Wallace were part of a violent East Coast-West Coast hip-hop rivalry. The feud's focal points were Knight's Death Row Records on the West Coast, and Bad Boy Records and its CEO Sean Combs on the East. Add to that gang involvement and the stench of police malfeasance wafting through Knight's insider connections to the LAPD, and there are dark alleys in all directions. (Reps for Combs and Knight did not reply to requests for comment.)

With the indictment generating global news and tabloid fodder, family members aren't alone in



Above: Orlando "Baby Lane" Anderson was a suspected shooter in the death of Tupac. Left: Prior to the shooting, Tupac, Knight, and members of their entourage attacked Anderson in the MGM Grand after a Mike Tyson fight.

PREVIOUS PAGE: MICHEL HADDI/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES

JOHN L. SMITH *is a longtime Las Vegas journalist and the author of more than a dozen books.*

Tupac and Knight shortly before the rapper's murder. It would become the last photo taken of the superstar.

wondering "Why now?" The story of the long-stalled case appears to include not just warring gangs and treacherous hip-hop bosses, but also sparring law-enforcement agencies. The lack of closure in the murder of such a troubled but undeniably talented victim has encouraged conspiracies to grow like weeds from the asphalt.

One of the biggest murders in Las Vegas history might also be the most tangled investigation. Did the LAPD and Las Vegas police collaborate on solving the murder or try to stymie each other? Did two cops from different departments almost come to blows over a possible murder weapon? Did certain members of Vegas police not want to solve it in the first place? Why weren't follow-ups done with key players connected to the murder? When exactly did Las Vegas police learn about that crucial agreement Davis made with law enforcement? Did egos get in the way of law enforcement? Interviews with cops, reporters, lawyers, and Davis' own account of events suggest all that and a lot more.

With detectives from two of the nation's largest police departments and agents dispatched to a federal task force in 2006 investigating the sensational hip-hop murder cases of Tupac and Biggie Smalls, Tupac's family, fans, and foes alike continue to wonder what took so long to get an indictment. If pointed fingers were loaded pistols, a lot of people should be running for cover.

LEONARD JEFFERSON

BY HIS OWN telling, Davis doesn't fit the stereotype of a gangster. He had two parents, a roof over his head, and food on the table. As a kid, he didn't play with pistols, but Pop Warner football – coincidentally, on a team with Knight. Davis' father served in the Marines and moved his family to California. His mother kept busy with the children, eventually a dozen in all. The young Davis family settled in the South Los Angeles neighborhood of Watts, where Davis was born. As he recalls it, after the 1965 Watts Riots, his dad used $50,000 won at Tijuana's Agua Caliente Racetrack to move the family up to Compton, three miles and half a world away. He candidly admits that the decision to go gangster was his alone. "Compton was where my parents chose to raise their family," he wrote in his memoir. "But the street life, that decision was all mine."

Davis started dealing weed as a teenager before graduating to powder and crack cocaine, whose profits would fuel gang violence and ravage the neighborhood he grew up in. At least two brothers joined in. By 1990, his older brother and "best friend" Michael joined him in the gangster life and was shot and killed in Compton. Keffe D lived large and developed interstate operations with trafficking connections linked to the Cali Cartel. At the height of his game, he claims, he was moving hundreds of kilos of cocaine a month. But he also paid a heavy price, beginning in the mid-1980s with multiyear stretches in state and federal prisons. In his memoir, he brags about shooting up a neighborhood, operating crack houses, and battering women. How accurate a narrator Davis might be is up for debate, but of such things, Compton street legends are made.

Despite giving conflicting accounts of his role in the Tupac murder – he denied his involvement in the shooting for a decade – Davis is confident in his own self-image. Bragging *Godfather*-style in his memoir, he writes, "In my South Side Crip neighborhood, I was known by several names; Big Dawg, Big Homey, some called me Gotti, but most knew me as Keffe D. In terms of rank, if we were an Army, I was a five-star general. If we were a city, I was the mayor. If we were a country, I was President Obama." If he lost family members and those under his command from time to time, that was the cost of doing business.

Although Davis risked his freedom discussing his role in the murder publicly, he appears to have believed that he was in the clear, susceptible only

to the shaky aim of old enemies, the rhetorical stones of reporters, and the chiding of retired cops hyping their own memoirs. One was Greg Kading, a retired LAPD detective who left in 2010 after watching a lengthy task-force investigation into the murders of Tupac and Biggie falter, he believed, due to the politics inside the department. Kading's 2011 memoir, *Murder Rap: The Untold Story of the Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur Murder Investigations,* includes information gleaned from the 2009 federal proffer Davis signed.

The book, in which Kading calls Davis "a legend in his own mind," also claims Keffe D is an admitted liar and blowhard whose credibility is suspect. In a quote that's sure to have defense attorneys in the Davis case taking notes, Kading writes: "We were well-aware of the informant's shortcomings as a credible witness in any legal proceeding. No court in the country was going to accept the word of Duane Keith 'Keffe D' Davis, a convicted felon and a confessed liar. As to whether we believed what Keffe D was telling us, with certain reservations I'd have to say that we did."

Commonly known as a "queen-for-a-day agreement," a proffer is a written statement between a prosecutor and a defendant that allows the defendant to give truthful information about an alleged crime without the government using the information obtained against him. At the time of his proffer – orchestrated by Kading and his partners – Davis was facing a minimum mandatory sentence of 25 years in a federal investigation of his interstate narcotics operation. The offer to Davis was straightforward: He agreed to speak truthfully about a range of crimes, beginning with the drug investigation, but also what he knew about the murders of Tupac and Biggie. And he knew plenty.

In his memoir, he says he agreed to the proffer to save not only himself, but also family members and his crew. He answered questions about his drug activity, his relationships with feuding hip-hop record-company bosses Knight and Combs, and his knowledge of the murders of Biggie and Tupac. Law enforcement couldn't use the proffer itself against Davis, but it didn't protect him from incriminating himself if he spoke out publicly.

Admissible as evidence only in the court of public opinion, Kading's book failed to make waves with the Las Vegas homicide detectives who had jurisdiction in the Tupac investigation, some of whom subsequently claimed they were not aware of the proffer agreement. But Kading kept busy, collaborating on a book-based 2015 documentary, *Murder Rap: Inside the Biggie and Tupac Murders,* with filmmaker Mike Dorsey that included excerpts of the detective's recording of Davis around the time of the proffer agreement. "We'll wipe they ass out quick," Davis brags in the film, referring to the shooting. Believing no one outside the room would ever hear his conversation, Davis shows zero compunction about the attempt to take out Tupac and Knight for what he believed would be a $1 million payoff from Death Row's competition, Bad Boy Records CEO Combs. (A rep for Combs did not reply to a request for comment, but Combs has previously vehemently denied the allegation.)

Las Vegas law enforcement initially responded with silence to the documentary. Was it the message, or perhaps the messenger, that bothered them? Former Las Vegas journalist and true-crime author Cathy Scott has followed the Tupac case since the shots were fired, and suspects it's a little of both. "Kading is all about publicity and taking credit for things, but the problem for Kading was he's no longer a police officer and hasn't been for years," Scott says. "He was trying to get either the LAPD or Metro to sign on with him to get [the investigation] done. He went to Vegas to talk to Metro. He called me at the time and asked for advice. He was all hyped up, and had also reached out to the DA's offices in both L.A. and Vegas."

By 2018, the Dorsey-Kading collaboration reemerged as the 10-episode *Unsolved: The Murders of Tupac and the Notorious B.I.G.,* starring Josh Duhamel as Kading. Davis, who by then had survived colon cancer and life in a racket with a prison-or-death retirement plan, stopped exercising his right to remain silent while others profited from his proffer. He apparently forgot that he was the one with something to lose by going public. After learning that Davis agreed to sit for multiple interviews with an attorney present during the production of the BET series *Death Row Chronicles,* Kading and Dorsey could barely believe their ears.

"He has to know that he can't talk about this case the way he did in his proffer deal," Dorsey recalls saying to Kading. "He's not protected outside of that one day that he went in and did his proffer. If he went on CNN and told that same story [the next day] ... it could have been used against him. I think Keffe saw all this attention on his story and wanted to be the one to tell it."

IN THE SUMMER OF 2017, Kading and Dorsey signed on as consultants for *Death Row Chronicles,* whose producers managed to get Davis to sit for two studio interviews. Seated at a desk in an empty office 50 feet from the studio, Dorsey listened by headset and texted follow-up questions to the producer as Davis treaded carefully through the questioning.

The plan was nearly exposed when Davis was escorted down a hall that passed Dorsey's listening post and briefly stared at him through a window as he went by. "He looked in the office and locked eyes on me," says Dorsey, who by then had gone public about his own opinion of Davis' culpability.

Arriving in shorts and a T-shirt, Davis initially balked at sitting down without his suit on, but eventually relented. "He was very cagey in the interviews. He was careful about how he worded his answers, and had a lawyer present with him in the studio," Dorsey says. When the series was being aired, Dorsey contacted Metro's homicide bureau and suggested the officers watch the Davis interview on *Death Row Chronicles,* which premiered in February 2018, a week before *Unsolved.* The profile of Davis was about to get much bigger. Dorsey says he reached out to Metro's homicide bureau with a simple goal: "I made it my mission to get the detectives to reopen the case, which they did."

At the time, Davis was in the process of digging his hole deeper with his memoir, *Compton Street Legend: Notorious Keffe D's Street-Level Accounts of Tupac and Biggie Murders, Death Row Origins, Suge Knight, Puffy Combs, and Crooked Cops.* Coauthored with Yusuf Jah, the 225-page paperback is a readable and remorseless advertisement for Davis' life as a drug dealer. He admits providing the proffer and substantial cooperation in exchange for a pass on a federal narcotics case. He acknowledges he was riding in the white Cadillac at the time of the shooting, and passed the murder weapon into the back seat – all of which can be used against him, prosecutors argue. Davis' message to readers on the back of the book won't help his case: "The last living eyewitness to Tupac's murder is telling his story."

Compton Street Legend was published 23 years after the shooting, and not long after *Death Row Chronicles* and *Unsolved* brought the case back before the public. Those who had watched the homicide case languish for so long remained skeptical. As the months passed, Las Vegas detectives kept a low profile on the status of their investigation.

Perhaps emboldened by police silence, Davis became more comfortable in front of the camera as he pushed his memoir, appearing in YouTube interviews on popular hip-hop channels such as The Art of Dialogue and VladTV. He at times expressed regret that the shooting had taken place, but didn't deny having an insider's knowledge of the details. "When nothing happened to him, I think he thought, 'I guess it's safe. I guess they're not going to do anything as long as I'm being careful how I word it,' " Dorsey says.

"DJ Vlad" Lyubovny is among those skeptical of the timing of Davis' indictment after he spent so many years hiding in plain sight. "The information has been out there," Lyubovny says. "It's not like they have to have [a lot] to corroborate what Keffe D is saying. I mean, Keffe could always say, 'Hey, I made all this up because I was facing a life sentence, and then I made up more of it because I was being paid to do the interviews. I saw it as a stream of income.' "

ON JULY 17, 2023, with a heat warning in effect and temperatures in the Las Vegas valley expected to exceed 112 degrees all week, Las Vegas police and a SWAT unit converged on the Henderson home Davis shares with his wife, Paula Clemons. According to grand-jury testimony, police recovered a cellphone, laptops, documents, two tubs of photographs, a copy of *Vibe* featuring Tupac, a copy of the Kading book, and news clippings about the murder, including some contained in a small clothbound photo album dating back to 1996. Police also recovered a copy of a 1998 search warrant and a room receipt from the former Monte Carlo Hotel and Casino, where, authorities say, a Davis associate stayed at the time of the shooting. In addition, they found .40-caliber cartridges of the general type used in the fatal shooting, which Metro sources said would be compared to the slugs that killed Tupac.

Around seven weeks later, the Metro police came calling as Davis ambled down the sidewalk. There's the rub for Keffe D. After nearly three decades, he's the last man standing in one of the biggest unsolved murder cases in hip-hop history.

Beyond the lack of a murder weapon and getaway car, the suspected shooter and two other accomplices have already been lost to the hard grind of gangster life. Orlando Anderson has most often

Compton Police hold up a Death Row necklace found during a raid. Several gang murders occurred following Tupac's death.

MICHAEL CAULFIELD/AP IMAGES

"WE COULDN'T LET NO RECORD COMPANY STUDIO GANGSTERS DO US LIKE THAT. HAD THEY LOST THEIR FUCKIN' RAPPIN' ASS MINDS?"

been identified as the suspected triggerman. Firing from the back seat of the rented white Cadillac, he reportedly aimed at targets in a parked BMW just a few feet away. The indictment also names Deandrae "Big Dre" Smith as another passenger and possible killer. But under Nevada law, you don't have to pull the trigger to pay the price. Active participants in a premeditated homicide can also be charged with first-degree murder. In legalese, that leaves little wiggle room for Davis, who is accused of "aiding and abetting in the commission of this crime, with the intent that this crime be committed, by counseling, encouraging, hiring, commanding, inducing and/or otherwise procuring the other to commit the crime."

Returning to California hours after the shooting, Anderson reportedly wasted little time dropping hints to his fellow Crips about his alleged role in the Tupac hit. Anderson was already a suspect in at least one other murder that year. Hauled in for questioning by police in the Tupac case, he was never charged. On May 29, 1998, Anderson was killed in a gang shootout at a Compton car wash.

It wasn't the bullets, but the burgers that took out Big Dre Smith, who, a friend said in grand-jury testimony, was six feet six and weighed close to 400 pounds. The trusted Crip who might have pulled the trigger on Tupac died in 2004 from complications related to obesity. The Cadillac's wheelman, Terry "Bubble Up" Brown, was shot to death in 2015, with his body discovered inside a Compton marijuana dispensary.

But years before, Smith and Brown were in Vegas with Davis, who admits he was among the nearly 10,000 people in attendance at the heavyweight fight at the MGM Grand Garden Arena that saw Mike Tyson flatten World Boxing Association titleholder Bruce Seldon in the first round. Seated near ringside in a $3,000 blue pinstripe suit and gold tie, Davis would have been easy to spot.

The main event was a bust, but the violence in Vegas had just begun, first with the beating of Anderson inside the MGM Grand by Tupac, Knight, and members of their entourage. Prosecutors alleged in the grand-jury proceedings that the fight, purportedly payback for the theft of a Death Row gold chain a few weeks earlier during a Crips and Mob Piru melee in California, precipitated the drive-by shooting that came hours later.

Metro bicycle cops, supervised that night by Sgt. Chris Carroll, patrolled the traffic-clogged Strip and sidewalks bustling with boisterous party animals. One veteran officer describes the policing strategy not in traditional law-enforcement terms, but as just "trying to keep a lid on things" in the hope that nothing heavy goes down.

That hope faded at approximately 11:15 p.m., when Carroll received a shots-fired call from two bicycle officers positioned on an upper floor of a parking garage near the attack. The officers didn't witness the shooting. From their surveillance vantage point, they could see a line of cars pull away and proceed west toward what they later learned was Knight's mobbed-up Club 662, where Tupac and Tyson were scheduled to make an appearance that evening.

In a moment that provides an easy metaphor for the much-criticized investigation to come, Carroll's cohorts initially gave chase on two wheels after seeing a Black BMW peel away from the procession, catching up to it in traffic near Las Vegas Boulevard and Harmon Avenue. Carroll reached the vehicle – two of its tires flattened after hitting a concrete curb – at a nearby intersection. Drawing his weapon, Carroll ordered the two occupants out of the car. Only the hulking driver complied. The cop was no hip-hop fan, but he recognized an agitated Knight. Carroll repeatedly ordered Knight to stay back as he attempted to check the status of the passenger, slumped in his seat behind a bullet-pocked door. After prying open the damaged door, Carroll recalls easing the body of a badly bleeding and barely conscious 25-year-old man to the pavement. From somewhere behind him he heard a frantic Knight shouting, "Pac! Pac! Pac!"

Only then did it dawn on the cop that the man bleeding from multiple chest wounds, his nostrils, and mouth was Tupac Shakur.

"He was still breathing, but in very bad shape," Carroll recalls. "I spoke to him. Most homicide victims know their killer. I asked who shot him."

The rapper known for his lyrical elegance offered a terse response: "Fuck you," he told Carroll before sagging into unconsciousness.

Approximately four minutes later, Carroll recalls, paramedics arrived and intubated the dying man. Knight was also taken to the hospital. As ambulances made their way through clogged streets toward University Medical Center, Davis says in his memoir, they passed four men – Davis, Anderson, Smith, and Brown – waiting to cross Las Vegas Boulevard. As sirens blared and chaos ensued, the quartet gazed at the vehicles racing to the hospital. "There we were, looking right into the ambulances transporting Tupac and Suge," Davis recalls in his memoir. "The moral of the story, real Gangsters are nothing to fuck with!"

Hit four times, including twice in the chest, Tupac stayed alive for six days before he was declared dead on Sept. 13, 1996. Knight recovered from a messy but minor flesh wound. He had much bigger headaches coming his way.

When news of the shooting reached California a few days later, the South Side Compton Crips and Mob Piru and their Bloods allies went to the mattresses in a South Central shooting war. Several drive-by shootings and three murders followed in the next 10 days, and bodies dropped for months afterward. When East Coast rapper Biggie Smalls died in a still-unsolved drive-by shooting on March 9, 1997, in Los Angeles, police sources surmised it was a West Coast retaliation for the Tupac killing.

Tupac's defiant epithet would come to define the Las Vegas detectives' frustration as they at-

tempted to get material witnesses to cooperate. Knight was no help, and years later, journalist Randall Sullivan would claim in his book that Knight used his legal connections to avoid sitting for an interview in the aftermath of the shooting. Knight's refrain with the cops was consistent. One officer recalled, "He heard something, but saw nothing." (An attorney for Knight did not reply to a request for comment.)

THE EARLY INVESTIGATION took another blow in November 1996, when one of the few eyewitnesses willing to cooperate with Vegas detectives – Tupac backup-group member Yafeu Fula – was shot to death in an Orange, New Jersey, housing project. "It just kind of adds to our frustration of this whole investigation," Metro homicide's Sgt. Kevin Manning told the *Los Angeles Times*. (Subpoenaed in the Davis case, Manning declined an interview request for this article.)

Further, Metro detectives found few potential witnesses willing to speak to police. Those who were not at the crime scene had plenty to say about gang violence, the shame of the Tupac shooting, and the tragic loss of a gifted, creative talent. But those who were present mostly kept their mouths shut. Despite a 10-car entourage idling near the shooting scene, "all of the people seem to be looking somewhere else and didn't see much," wisecracked Metro veteran Phil Roland at the time.

Suspicions between the Las Vegas and Los Angeles police departments didn't help. During the six days Tupac lingered on life-support, off-duty cops employed as Death Row security remained at the Las Vegas hospital, Sullivan claims in his book, thwarting Metro homicide detectives' attempts to locate witnesses willing to cooperate. Key suspects returned to California, and some of the Compton and Los Angeles cops were working for Knight, according to Sullivan. Metro detectives soon started hearing the name of a suspected triggerman: Orlando Anderson.

Critics chided Las Vegas police for being sloppy and slow, questioning everything from their racial sensitivity to their efforts to preserve the crime scene. As time went on, observers wondered if Metro lost focus on the investigation at a time when, as one street cop from the era tells ROLLING STONE, "it seemed like there was a house-party rapper getting shot every week in those days." To some in uniform, Tupac paid the price for embracing Death Row's gangster ethos.

The first reporter at the shooting scene remains a critic of Metro's early efforts in the case. Former *Las Vegas Sun* reporter Cathy Scott covered the breaking news, the immediate aftermath, and wrote a true-crime paperback on the anniversary of the shooting. *The Killing of Tupac Shakur* explores early conspiracy theories about Tupac's death and includes a photo from the autopsy that some disbelieving fans tore from its pages. (One easily debunked theory painted Carroll as an accomplice to the killing, claiming that he hauled away a breathing Tupac. "Didn't they realize that I was riding a bicycle that night?" Carroll asks.)

Less than a year after the legal circus surrounding the O.J. Simpson murder trial in Los Angeles, a Metro captain told Scott that "a big trial would be bad for tourism." "I always got the feeling they just didn't want to solve it," Scott says. "Maybe they hoped it would go away."

Scott feels it "seemed off" the way detectives blamed Tupac's entourage and Knight for not talking to police, and because of that, they said, they were getting nowhere with the case.

"Every detective I spoke with said the same thing," Scott adds. "So, I asked a captain why it appeared the police weren't eager to solve the case. At the time, the PR machine was in the midst of trying to turn Vegas into a family and kid-friendly destination. The captain said it would be bad for tourism to have gangbangers coming into Vegas for a big murder trial. I said, 'You're kidding.' He said, 'No, it's from the top.' "

It wasn't the only allegation of reluctance to solve one of the biggest murders in hip-hop history. During the LAPD investigation of the drive-by killing of Biggie Smalls – which law enforcement considered an act of retaliation following the Tupac murder – Detectives Russell Poole and Fred Miller traveled to Las Vegas to confer about the status of the Tupac case and get a look at the evidence. Following Metro's protocol, evidence boxes marked "Shakur" would have been moved by technicians from a secured warehouse into an examination room, where the detectives would enter only after showing identification and signing in. The examination takes place with handlers wearing gloves and evidence personnel present.

Poole recalled to Sullivan seeing "this whole cabinet of clues that they had just sort of filed away and weren't really following up on." Could ostensible minor details have cracked the case wide open? "We all talked about what a defense lawyer would do with all the contradictory evidence that had come in," Poole said in Sullivan's 2003 book, *LAbyrinth* (based on some of his earlier ROLLING STONE reporting on the case). "But then the Vegas guys told us the main reason they would never solve this case was that the politicians didn't want them to. They said the powers that be had let them know the city didn't need an O.J.-style circus. I was shocked, but my partner was yukking it up with them, and saying he feels the same way about the Smalls case." Poole recalled one police officer saying, "These are just gangbangers with money." (Metro homicide detective Brent Becker would later scoff at Poole's assessment.) Poole retired in frustration in 1999 with his theories of the case taking flak. He died of a heart attack in 2015.

Metro had its own lamentable history of controversial officer-involved shootings that would eventually lead to a Department of Justice review, but proud former cops like ex-homicide detective Phil Ramos are quick to defend the Las Vegas department against accusations its detectives dumped the Tupac case. Without eyewitness cooperation, key suspects in California, and no murder weapon or getaway car, there could be no easy solutions. "We knew who the shooter was," Ramos says. "It was Orlando Anderson, and Orlando was dead. The consensus was, nobody's going to be charged with Tupac's murder because the shooter's dead."

Kading defends much of the Las Vegas effort. "The idea that Vegas didn't want to solve this because it was high-profile defies logic," he says. "Because if you don't solve it, the message you're sending to the criminal community and the public is that we don't care if gang members come here and shoot people and kill them. And we don't do anything about it if they do. So that actually works against the idea that it's bad for tourism."

IF THE FALLOUT FROM the Tupac murder case is a story of gangs in conflict, it at times has included warring police departments. From the start, Metro has been criticized for failing to bring suspects to justice, while the LAPD's secrecy and lack of information-sharing is also in question. One Las Vegas homicide veteran recalls Detective Dan Long nearly coming to blows with an LAPD counterpart over the processing and custody of the possible murder weapon, with the California cops believing the detectives in Las Vegas were holding out on them. After LAPD told Long they had the murder weapon, he traveled to L.A. to take custody of it, but was told he was being tested to determine whether Metro had been hiding it. Neither the murder weapon nor the getaway car were ever recovered. (Kading claims that the LAPD willingly turned over a possible murder weapon to Metro around 2007, and that the incident with Long occurred in 2009, when he went to Vegas to arrest Davis, which he was unable to do due to the proffer agreement. He also says claims of physical fighting are "overexaggerated." A subpoenaed witness in the Davis case, Long declined interview requests for this article.)

Davis participated in the proffer agreement with law enforcement, but if you're wondering whether or not Las Vegas Metro knew about it, you're not alone. Kading writes in his book that Vegas police were cut out of the loop with the approval of LAPD chief legal counsel Gerald Chaleff and Chief Bill Bratton. "We were not obliged to notify the LVMPD of our findings," Kading writes, "thus freeing us to pursue the broader conspiracy case without jeopardizing our prized informant." (Bratton did not reply to a request for comment; attempts to reach Chaleff were unsuccessful.) When the hip-hop-war task force folded in 2010 without bringing indictments in the Tupac and Biggie murders, or the greater conspiracy case involving rival record companies, street gangs, and millionaire drug dealers, Kading says he felt ethically comfortable in taking a recording of the Davis interview with him when he retired to write his memoir.

Whatever Metro's legitimate complaints were, as Kading sees it, there's essentially no Davis indictment without the proffer and all that followed. "We're an agency who took it upon ourselves to investigate a murder that they would perceive as being their jurisdiction. So I get where they feel a little bit disregarded," Kading tells ROLLING STONE. "But there is no prosecution of Duane Davis had we not done the things that we did. The drug investigation led to the proffer. The proffer led to a confession. The confession led to a public outing of Keffe D. And that compelled him to speak for himself, which is ultimately how we got to today's indictment and prosecution."

The prosecution argues that Davis has written and talked his way into the charges he faces. But will it be enough? With no murder weapon and no trace of the getaway car, the 2023 presentment before the Clark County, Nevada, grand jury was

Duane "Keffe D" Davis in court in October. Released on bail in early January, his trial is scheduled to start in June.

"SO WHAT THEY GOT YOU FOR, MAN?" ASKED THE COP.

"THE BIGGEST CASE IN LAS VEGAS HISTORY," DAVIS REPLIED.

"I AIN'T WORRIED ABOUT IT."

missing traditional physical evidence. Instead, it included dozens of video excerpts and articles, along with the testimony of Denvonta Lee, a former Crips associate, who testified about what his former roommate – the now-deceased "Big Dre" Smith – supposedly revealed about the shooting. Namely, that Smith and not Anderson was the actual triggerman that night in retaliation for the beatdown at the MGM. "That's exactly what Dre told me, that he did the shooting," Lee said. In this version, it seems Smith was smart enough to let Anderson take the credit for killing a superstar.

What remains unclear is when Las Vegas police learned of the proffer's existence and substance. Grand-jury testimony in Davis' case last September raised questions of a lack of communication between the two police departments that legal experts say could put the case in jeopardy. Now retired, Clifford Mogg was the latest in the line of lead detectives in the Tupac case when he joined in 2018. He testified before the grand jury that he still had not received a copy of the recording or transcript of the Davis proffer. (Mogg declined an interview request for this article.) But given the revelations contained in Kading's 2011 book and the 2015 Dorsey documentary, how could the leader of the investigation not know about the existence of the Davis proffer agreement before 2018?

Kading tells ROLLING STONE that the proffer was initially kept from Las Vegas police out of a need to protect their witness, Davis, but that Metro was later informed. When that case folded, Kading took the material with him and used it as part of his book *Murder Rap*. "Normal procedure would be for us to turn over the results of our investigation to [Las Vegas police] – except that there was nothing normal about this case," Kading wrote in his book. "We were apprehensive that the Las Vegas investigators would insist on conducting their own interviews.... We couldn't let that happen."

After the grand-jury proceeding, Kading tells ROLLING STONE, he made sure Mogg received copies of the Davis proffer-session recording, explaining, "I don't know if he had it at the time, but he certainly has it now because I gave it to him."

The only parts of the proffer that Mogg claims he knew about had been posted on the internet "in small snippets," as the prosecutor put it. Although prosecutors read from the Davis memoir during the grand jury, and Mogg endorsed the conclusion of Poole and others that the murders of Tupac and Biggie were related, he said in his testimony he hadn't read Kading's book.

A 40-year law-enforcement veteran who has investigated 500 murders, Mogg only picked up the Tupac cold case in 2018. He was one of several detectives to work the murder case in its third decade. Nearing retirement, Mogg planned to open a private-investigator's office, according to a Metro source, after solving one last big case. "He said he wanted to go out with a bang by solving the Tupac Shakur case," one law-enforcement source says.

Mogg wasn't the only person involved in the investigation who says he hadn't been aware of the proffer and recording until recently. David Roger, the Clark County district attorney from 2003 to 2012, recalls few specifics from the long-ago murder, but he's certain his office was never informed of the existence of a federal proffer by a prime suspect in such a sensational case – especially one that resulted in the ridicule of Metro for failing to bring a killer to justice. "Law-enforcement agencies have a spirit of cooperation when going after the criminal element," Roger says. "If LAPD had the authority to discuss this proffer agreement with us and chose not to, then shame on them. This was a murder investigation that was important to a lot of people, and they should have shared with us whatever information they could."

L.A. detective Poole remained suspicious of the Tupac and Biggie investigations to the end. "Murders don't go unsolved when the victim is a celebrity who gets shot dead in front of dozens of witnesses who can identify the killers," he told Sullivan. "Remind me of any recent cases where that has happened, other than Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls. Murders like that go unsolved if the police don't want to solve them."

As authorities closed in on Davis during the heat of July, his own tone changed in an interview with the YouTube hip-hop channel The Art of Dialogue, admitting: "I hate that shit happened, dog. It fucked up a lot of people's lives, dude. Power to God.... I wish that shit would have never happened."

ONE PERSON WHO could shed light on what happened is Knight, who currently squats in a San Diego County, California, correctional facility, serving a 28-year sentence for manslaughter after his 2015 fatal hit-and-run of friend Terry Carter. After a menacing football career at UNLV in the mid-1980s, the Mob Piru Blood gang member parlayed bodyguard gigs into entering the music business, co-founding Death Row Records with a style that intimidated competitors and even some of his stars.

The ensuing 28 years have seen Knight endure bankruptcy, beatings, multiple shootings, and prison stretches, but nothing ap- [*Cont. on 79*]

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Reviews

Music

RADIOHEAD'S SWEET SIDE HUSTLE

Thom Yorke and Jonny Greenwood create some low-key majesty with the Smile

By JON DOLAN

The Smile
Wall of Eyes
XL

THE RELEASE of a new Radiohead album is greeted in certain circles as a kind of holy occasion, a time to drop everything and commence Deep Listening.

We have not witnessed such a hallowed event since 2016, when Radiohead dropped *A Moon Shaped Pool,* and a new album after such a wait sure would be welcome. Sometimes, though, it's nice to see what the members of a great band can do when working outside such weighty expectations. That's the story of the Smile, the excellent side band Radiohead singer Thom Yorke and lead guitarist Jonny Greenwood have formed with jazz drummer Tom Skinner. On the band's 2022 debut, *A Light for* →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Nicole Rifkin

Greenwood, Skinner, and Yorke

THE SMILE

Attracting Attention, the stakes were low, and the jams were loose.

The Smile are back with *Wall of Eyes,* a lavishly gorgeous second LP. No one is going to convene a Deep Listening Consortium to unpack its meaning, and that's part of the appeal. This music drifts, and we drift with it. "I can go anywhere that I want," Yorke sings against the spacious jazz rock of ambling "Friend of a Friend," adding, "just gotta turn myself inside out."

On the album's opening title track, Greenwood unspools some acoustic lullaby strum and Yorke coos anxiously as his voice pings amid elegiacally dissolving electro-acoustic folderol. And that's pretty much it for five transfixing minutes. "Teleharmonic" is ambiguous bliss, with Yorke making like a dyspeptic soul boy as the song's crinkly whir gathers around him until the effect almost feels hymnlike. On "Under Our Pillows," Greenwood's guitar contorts and glistens as Yorke's quavering voice slips in and out of focus, then the music fades unexpectedly into an ambient wash. With its Doppler-effect drum rumble, shadowy piano, archangel strings, and Yorke's enveloping mumble-blues vocalese, "I Quit" feels relentless and distracted, a brilliant balance of opposites.

The first Smile record rocked out a little more than recent Radiohead. This one is more subdued, but there are a couple of bangers. "Read the Room" is coiled and funky, with Greenwood splaying out coolly fractured notes over Skinner's tense groove, before the song lifts off into a sublime krautrock-y zone-out.

The album's intense emotional peak is the eight-minute "Bending Hectic." Greenwood creates a little galaxy of distended shimmering notes. Yorke sets a scene of driving on a mountainside in Italy, and then "letting go of the wheel." Skinner tensely pushes the beat, Greenwood's guitar ripples ominously, and Yorke goes over the edge, narrating a moment of dread that also creepily feels like a moment of freedom. Violent strings swell, and Greenwood's guitar explodes into some of the heaviest, meanest noise he's ever conjured, mirroring the cathartic collapse Yorke is evoking. It's the kind of terrifying grandeur these guys do better than anyone else. In any package it shows up in, we'll always take it. ®

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BRITTNEY SPENCER PROVES IT

A promising country star delivers a debut album worth waiting for By JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

Brittney Spencer
My Stupid Life
ELEKTRA

LIKE MOST SINGERS new in town, Brittney Spencer spent the bulk of her first decade in Nashville paying dues. She busked to passersby, sang backup for Carrie Underwood, and carved out a space for provocative songwriting in the city's Christian-worship-music community. Then, in 2020, in the wake of country music's reckoning with its long history of racial exclusion, Spencer uploaded a viral acoustic cover of the Highwomen's "Crowded Table." Since then, she's opened for

Willie Nelson and Megan Thee Stallion, sang at the CMAs, and even became an affiliate member of the Highwomen, the group whose song started it all.

But until *My Stupid Life,* a debut country record that's certain to cement Spencer's place in the genre, all of that seeming stardom had gone untested. The album takes a few songs to find its footing, but once it does, *My Stupid Life* lifts off and soars: It's hard to think of a stronger run on a country LP in recent memory than the five-song stretch beginning with the self-reclamation ballad "The Last Time" and ending with the tender heartbreak of "If You Say So." "The microwave love and toaster vows," she sings of the faltering new marriage in the latter, "can't bare the weight of us right now."

Spencer traverses a blend of muscular pop rock, textured soul, and anthemic singalong pop, all of it grounded squarely in a genre-agnostic country that conjures Maren Morris' landmark album *Hero.* (Morris, one of Spencer's foremost champions, looms large here, adding vocals on one song, getting name-dropped in another.) Spencer has assembled an ace team to showcase her versatile voice and incisive writing, including producer Daniel Tashian (Kacey Musgraves' *Golden Hour*). The result is a record unencumbered by the need to constantly prove its Nashville bona fides, and in doing so ends up being one of the more convincing country statements in some time.

My Stupid Life is a deftly told collection of stories that, like her "Crowded Table" cover, simmer with subtext. Underneath the sugary gloss on these songs about flirting and flailing lurk layers of meaning: Beneath the ode to partying at home in sweatpants on "Night In" lies the threat of "drunk boys mumbling 'Can I buy you a drink?'" The love story of "My First Rodeo" also works as a parable of a singer who's spent years being ignored in a town that hands out opportunities like coupons. Then there's the acoustic closer, "Reaching Out," a song about striving for honesty when things aren't going great. "This world is full of stories that look quite like my own," Spencer sings in a whisper. It took too long, but thank God she's finally been given the chance to tell them.

FROM TOP: JIMMY FONTAINE; LEONN WARD

BREAKING

The Last Dinner Party Are Ready to Party

THERE'S SOMETHING fitting about the fact that the Last Dinner Party, a five-woman band from the U.K., came together during the lockdown. Their first single, last year's rapturous "Nothing Matters," sounded like ABBA on a bender. Everything about the *Wuthering Heights* pop on their debut album, *Prelude to Ecstasy,* has a similar sense of release. The Last Dinner Party have been through a gauntlet of buzz, backlash, and a gig opening for the Rolling Stones. But one thing is clear: They want to conquer a messy, enticing world that's newly open for business. **DAVID BROWNE**

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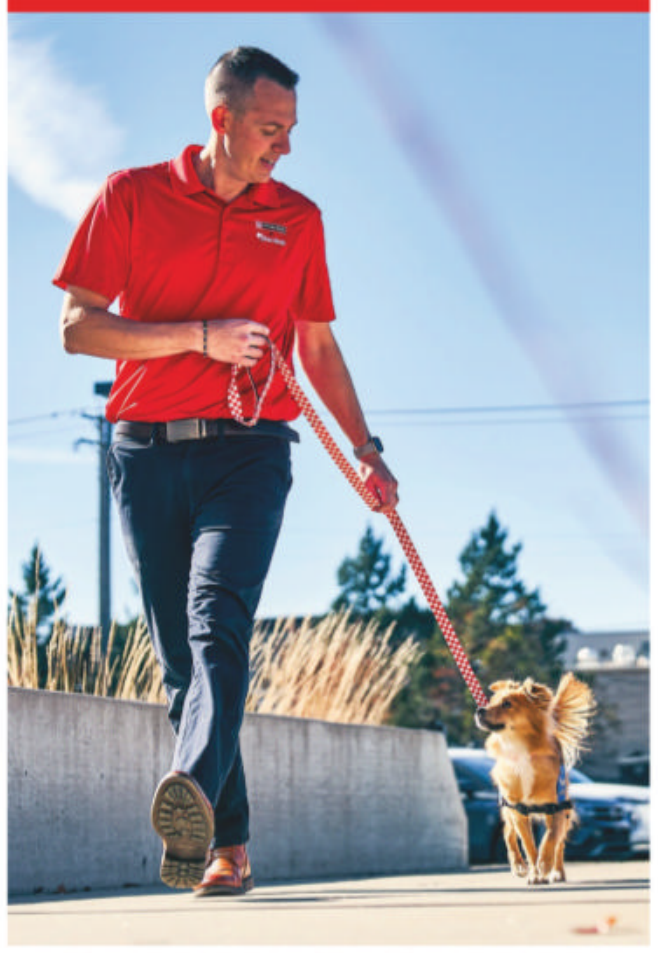

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Butler is ready for battle.

SPIELBERG'S WWII EPIC MISSES MARK

In 'Masters of the Air,' Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks recruit a talented young cast to give WWII bombardiers their due

ALAN SEPINWALL

Masters of the Air

NETWORK	Apple TV+
AIR DATE	Premieres Jan. 26
STARRING	Austin Butler Callum Turner Barry Keoghan Anthony Boyle Nate Mann Ncuti Gatwa Josiah Cross

IN ONE EPISODE of the World War II epic, a character collapses from exhaustion and sleeps through the events of D-Day, which were so memorably featured in *Saving Private Ryan*. In another, we realize that several characters are being held in the same POW camp that was the subject of the classic Sixties film *The Great Escape,* and that our heroes had no idea the escape was happening until well after the fact.

That parts of two iconic WWII movies happen between scenes of *Masters of the Air* isn't a problem in and of itself. Steven Spielberg, who reteams as producer with Tom Hanks for a follow-up to *Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific,* already made *Private Ryan*. But it's emblematic of a larger issue with the new project, where key story points and character arcs keep happening offscreen.

Adapted by *Band* veteran John Orloff from the book by Donald L. Miller, *Masters* tells the story of the 100th Bomb Group, a unit of soldiers who performed bombing raids over Germany. Their planes are called B-17 Flying Fortresses, even though they seem awfully vulnerable on missions that are considered successful if half of the crews return alive. (Once, only a single crew survives.)

Early on, one pilot complains that a friend didn't warn him about how horrifying each flight would be. "I didn't know what to say," the friend admits. "You've seen it now." But the first pilot replies, "I don't know what I saw." This is a consistent problem with *Masters*. We can tell what's happening, since the aerial battles are gorgeous, but not always to whom it's happening. *Band* sometimes ran into trouble distinguishing between a bunch of pasty guys wearing the same uniform. To that, *Masters* adds oxygen masks and flight caps, which make it all but impossible to keep track of who just got shot, or even which plane we're currently seeing.

It's a running gag that best pals Gale Cleven (Austin Butler) and John Egan (Callum Turner) are nicknamed Buck and Bucky, respectively.

Gatwa as a Tuskegee Airman

ROBERT VIGLASKY/APPLE TV+, 2

But at a certain point, the soldiers are so interchangeable that they may as well all be called Bucky. Even when we can see their faces and hair, they're defined by one character trait, maybe two. Buck is easygoing. Rosie (Nate Mann) is too dedicated to the job. Crosby (Anthony Boyle) suffers from airsickness and low self-esteem. Curt (Barry Keoghan) is … from New York? Bucky is the most compelling, largely because of the big Adam Driver energy Turner is giving.

Where *Band* perhaps had too many characters, it was still telling a contained story about a single company of paratroopers. As *Masters* continues, the story keeps splitting its focus between the 100th's missions, downed crew members trying to evade capture in France, the POW camp, and more. The penultimate episode introduces the Tuskegee Airmen, a hallowed group of Black fighter pilots (one played by Ncuti Gatwa). It's admirable in theory that these previously all-white productions are trying to be more inclusive. But the Tuskegee pilots are brought in so late – and are so tangential – that it plays as tokenism. By trying to tell so many different stories at once, *Masters* does a disservice to almost all of them. When people make big decisions, we're often left guessing as to why. And when some of them die, it doesn't sting that much because we barely knew them.

Parts of it are absolutely stunning to look at, and parts are emotionally effective, pure Dad TV. So this is less a misfire than a disappointment. *Band* has become an annual viewing tradition for many. *The Pacific* is too harrowing to invite that kind of repeat viewing, but once is all you need to appreciate how powerfully its story is told. *Masters of the Air* ultimately lacks the adventurous spirit of the former and the emotional gravity of the latter. Unlike the precision bombardiers of the 100th, it only occasionally hits its target. ®

THE INSANITY PLEA

[*Cont. from 27*] history (as a child he'd been diagnosed with ADHD and had Lyme disease, which went untreated so long it prompted hallucinations). In July 2016, though, Michael enlisted. After boot camp, Michael and his girlfriend married. (She gave Michael the notebook he had when apprehended, which she filled with things she loved about him.) It was "the most happy thing I've ever done in my life," Michael told Simopoulos. "It was a little bit of sunshine in a pretty [bad] existence so far."

THE CHAIN OF EVENTS that culminated with Rodney's death began in April 2018, when Michael's wife left him while he was deployed in Italy. He handled it, he says, largely by drinking. Not long after Michael returned stateside, Vanessa then told Michael that Rodney had put a gun to her head, asked if she was feeling lucky, and pulled the trigger. That prompted Michael to break into the house to steal Rodney's guns. But learning that Rodney was not his biological dad, Michael says, left him relieved. "Whatever was making him like that," he says, "I didn't have it in me." (Vanessa moved in with Rodney two weeks after Michael was born, at which point they decided together, she says, to raise Michael as his; she has never spoken publicly about who the father is.)

By the summer of 2019, Michael was sleeping in a box trailer in a base parking lot. "It was boiling hot," he says. "But when you're that depressed you don't care." One day, he was out target shooting when a dog started barking at him. The next thing he knew, he says, he was looking down at the dog, floating in a river, dead. "It was almost like coming out of a dream, but there was no dream," he told Sharon Kelley, a psychiatrist at the University of Virginia who conducted a court-ordered evaluation of Michael in 2021. "And it was almost like being teleported."

In the weeks that followed, he says, he had more episodes. Most often, he'd return to consciousness with a gun to his head. He considered that he was possessed. "But I'm just not that spiritual," he says. He wondered if he had another personality. But he ultimately dismissed this too, assuming it was "a pop-culture thing." What he knew was that they came on when he was stressed, that one of the only things that helped was reading from the book his ex-wife gave him, and that no one could know. "He was afraid he would end up in a mental hospital like his mom," Caldwell-Bono says. He deserted because he was worried he'd hurt someone; he reportedly stole the skid steer to finance the purchase of the RV. In retrospect, he told Kelley, it would have made sense to discard his guns, but "at the time, I was so in love with them. I don't know, it's stupid."

Michael returned to Roanoke on Halloween in the hopes of talking to his mom about the blackouts. But not long after he saw her, he says, he dissociated. Michael returned on Nov. 9 with the same aim. But while he remembered pulling up the driveway at Rodney's house, he recounted to Kelley and Simopoulos that he retained only moments of what happened next. First, he was in the woods, with guns. Then he was standing above Rodney. Finally, he huddled with his mom in the bathroom, crying.

The final time he returned to Roanoke, again to try to explain his mental state to his mom, he parked at St. Elizabeth's and briefly saw her. But as soon as Vanessa realized Diane had called the cops, she told him, "Michael, run!" He raced back to the RV. What he claims happened next is that he was inside the RV the entire time it was being searched by law enforcement, tucked in a tiny cabinet; it happened to contain his Marine Corps-issued gas mask, and after the propane tank was broken during the search, he says, he put it on.

Michael says he stayed there as it got dark, even as it was towed a few miles away. He then slipped out of the cabinet, climbed over a fence, and spent three days navigating through the woods to Rodney's place. There, he regularly checked the news about the manhunt. He also made a fake Facebook account, joined the Justice for Michael Brown group, and posted a meme – it showed a man in a cabinet, labeled "Michael Brown," smiling as another man in tactical gear rushed by, gun raised, oblivious.

To anyone who saw the state of the RV post-search, that Michael was in it seemed absurd. It was so destroyed that Dudley texted his wife, "All my evidence just got blown up." But about a month later, when Willoughby, Dudley, McFarling, and Caldwell-Bono together visited the tow lot, they found the cabinet Michael referred to open, and beneath it, a gas mask. Willoughby also listened to bodycam footage on which people said the exact things Michael claimed he'd overheard. "One of the officers was like, 'Wouldn't it be some shit if he was in here,' " she says. "Well, he was in there, and he heard that!"

THE FRANKLIN COUNTY courthouse is a stately building with white columns and a statue of a Confederate soldier out front. This was where the preliminary hearing for Michael was held, in June 2020. During Caldwell-Bono's cross-examination of Vanessa, she didn't question her account of the murder. Instead, she established that the Michael that Vanessa saw the morning of the murder was "not your Michael." She was setting the groundwork, in other words, for an insanity defense.

The idea that someone too mentally ill to differentiate right from wrong should not be held legally responsible for their actions is an ancient one, and can be found even in Rome's sixth-century Justinian code. The logic is straightforward – how can you punish someone for something they are unable to prevent? But as psychologist and attorney Susan Vinocour points out in her book *Nobody's Child: A Tragedy, a Trial, and a History of the Insanity Defense,* "Law and order demand that we convict the guilty, while justice demands that we acquit the innocent. But it is often hard to tell where justice lies when mental health and legal issues collide."

What qualifies a person as not guilty by reason of insanity, or NGRI, has shifted dramatically over the years. Which is perhaps inevitable, considering that our understanding of mental illness has changed so much through time. Someone who today might be diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder would have previously been told they had multiple personality disorder. Before that, they would have been called schizophrenic or hysteric or, longer ago, possessed.

The legal system's definition of insanity has also often been influenced by public opinion rather than, say, psychology. In 1981, after John Hinckley Jr. shot President Ronald Reagan (to impress Jodie Foster) and was found NGRI, the subsequent outcry prompted federal and numerous state standards to become more restrictive. Today, four states have abolished the NGRI defense altogether. But in Virginia, the law requires that a defendant establish that at the time of the crime they had a mental disease or defect that caused them to either not understand their actions' consequences, be unable to distinguish right from wrong, or experience an "irresistible impulse." In practice, though, "it doesn't matter too much how you formulate an insanity defense," Slobogin, the law professor, says. "Juries are going to go with their gut reaction." As Michele Galietta, a forensic psychologist and professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, puts it: "Laws are dispassionate. But the people that apply them are human."

After Hinckley's case, then-Sen. Dan Quayle endorsed constituents' views that the insanity defense "pampered criminals," allowing them to kill "with impunity." But this is just one of many misconceptions about it. While people found NGRI are diverted from a punitive system into one meant, instead, to help them, "they tend to spend longer in a mental hospital than they would in prison for a similar crime," Galietta says. Insanity-defense cases also so rarely go to trial (like all cases, they're more likely to lead to a plea bargain) that Caldwell-Bono never had an NGRI case be tried in court until Michael. "In my humble opinion, it takes a likable defendant, an unsympathetic victim, and a substantiation of mental illness," she says. (Galietta echoes this assessment – an NGRI defense is often successful when it involves "a defendant you can feel compassionate towards," she says, "and a victim who you don't necessarily feel sorry for.") If this had not proven feasible with Michael, though, Caldwell-Bono considered another option. "I don't mean to be insensitive, but there's a saying in the criminal-defense world: There's always the 'He needed killing' defense."

THE FIRST STEP toward an NGRI defense was to have Michael evaluated by a court-appointed psychiatrist, Kelley. After administering psychological tests meant to assess whether Michael was faking his symptoms (among other things), speaking with Michael for 15 hours, as well as with Vanessa and Diane, and looking over documents, Kelley determined Michael had "hints of other identities," a hallmark of dissociative identity disorder, or DID, but that ultimately his symptoms were consistent only with dissociative amnesia. (Dissociative amnesia and DID are both understood to be caused by trauma, and can each involve gaps in memory.) As a result, she wrote in her report, he was unable to understand the consequences of his actions and met the criteria for Virginia's insanity defense.

At that point, Dudley could have accepted Kelley's findings. But so much of Kelley's report rested on Michael's own account. Michael next met with Simopoulos, the second evaluator. But while he too concluded Michael met Virginia's insanity defense, he diagnosed him with depression, "[possibly] associated with psychosis," he wrote in his report. Michael's ex-wife, meanwhile, told NCIS that Michael was a psychopath with an alter ego he referred to as his "mean side." (She didn't respond to an interview request.)

Dudley and Caldwell-Bono agreed to a bench trial, meaning it was heard only by a judge; Simopoulos and Kelley were the only witnesses. Caldwell-Bono maintained that Michael would never have pursued an elaborate plan with the aim of ending up in a mental hospital, a place he never wanted to be. ("If Michael had planned the murder, he would have done it better," she said during the trial. "He would not have done it in front of his mother.") "But it was an alternate explanation!" Dudley says. "So I felt like there was an argument to be made on behalf of the government." [*Cont. on 78*]

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THE INSANITY PLEA

[*Cont. from 77*] During closing statements, Dudley, carrying the .300-caliber blackout rifle Michael used during the murder, argued that Kelley's report was "a house of straw." Caldwell-Bono laid out a defense that suggested a fantastical arc, in which trauma caused a boy to create an alter ego that returned, years later, to destroy the source of his trauma. And on Feb. 23, 2022, the judge sided with Caldwell-Bono. All of this was "hard to understand or accept," the judge declared, but she believed it unlikely Michael could have fabricated all the necessary evidence to support Simopoulos' and Kelley's findings. "So for those reasons," she said, "the court will find Michael Brown not guilty by reason of insanity."

FOR MORE THAN a year now, Michael has resided at a mental hospital in Danville, Virginia. In our conversations, he is by turns earnest, introspective, and self-deprecating, with no apparent inclination toward self-pity. He often seems as baffled by the recent turns of his life as anyone else. "I'm not 100 percent sure what she meant by that," Michael says about his ex-wife calling him a psychopath. "If I could get clarification from her or somebody that would have been great."

He still dresses neatly – when Murphy, his former neighbor, visited him recently, he'd spit-shined his shoes with jelly. He goes to treatment groups three times daily, and after dinner attends "evening leisure." The night before we talk, he sang "Take Me Home, Country Roads" at karaoke. "Singing isn't a passion of mine," he tells me. "But I like to be fun, so I participate." While Michael is willing to answer just about any question I have about his past, he is far more eager to discuss his appreciation for Caldwell-Bono and his determination to "make my future not shitty."

Michael hasn't had an episode of "lost time" in almost four years, he says, but so far, when he's been evaluated for release, the recommendation has been that he remain in the psychiatric facility. He hopes to one day live on a sailboat and to start a sailing academy. "You can be free and not have to worry about common problems," he says. "All you have to worry about is where the wind is coming from."

What I heard from a lot of people familiar with Michael's situation is that they don't know enough about dissociative amnesia to have an opinion about it, but they are glad the trial resolved how it did. "I don't know about any kind of personality disorder he may or may not have had," says Yolanda, Ballance's wife. "But he had a rough childhood, it seems. And if anything's justifiable ..." The woman whose daughter knew Michael says her guilt colors everything else. "I hate myself for not being aware enough to change what, in my mind, was that poor child's life," she says. "I feel sorry for Michael."

Rodney never had a funeral, though there was a viewing at a funeral home. "I insisted on that," Vanessa says. "I wanted to say goodbye." His ashes now sit in her closet. What had Rodney's childhood been like? Years ago, when Murphy learned Michael was homeless, she'd driven to the reserve where Rodney worked to try to better understand him. "All this bad stuff was happening, and I thought, 'I wonder why?' " she says. When she arrived, though, the place was as she remembered – quiet and peaceful.

When I visit last spring, there are kayaks pulled up on the reservoir's beach, and butterflies in the reeds. A few older guys play oldies from a battery-powered radio. No one wants to give their name, or talk about Rodney. But one admits knowing him. "He was just like the rest of us," he says. "A regular guy." ®

YOUNG GOP

[*Cont. from 31*] major repercussions in the makeup of the House of Representatives come November.

While Wax and his cadre try to parlay party throwing into actual political capital, those with real power are joining as well. New York Rep. Elise Stefanik, the chair of the House Republican Conference and fourth-ranked conservative in the House, formally joined the club in 2022.

"These [club members] are people who not only vote, they donate, they register voters, they volunteer on campaigns," Garrett Ventry, a longtime New York Republican adviser who joined the club two years ago, tells me. "There's some effectiveness and weight behind the punch when you can act like that instead of just as a policy shop."

Of the club's current leadership, Burra has spent the most time on Capitol Hill – albeit with politicians who've made names for themselves for all of the wrong reasons. He worked in 2021 as a "special projects coordinator" for Gaetz while the congressman was being investigated by the Justice Department for a slew of allegations related to sex trafficking (which he denied). Burra parlayed that into a gig as the "director of operations" for disgraced ex-Rep. Santos, a former member of the club. (Santos tells me he let his membership dues lapse at the end of 2023, but expects to rejoin the club.) While Burra has the most official policy experience, Wax is attempting to make a name for himself by going on right-wing radio and streaming shows (including Bannon's *War Room* podcast, of which Burra was once a producer) and writing for the conservative site TownHall.

Wax swears these efforts are working. Some of his columns, he says, he forwards on to Trump's personal secretary, Natalie Harp, who apparently prints out Wax's articles, which Trump annotates in black Sharpie. (It's a move Trump has pulled thousands of times with hundreds of reporters and pundits over his four decades in public life.) At the Beach Cafe, Wax shows me one of these exchanges, a series of DMs in which Harp passes on Trump's gushing praise and Wax bows and scrapes with gratitude. Wax tells me Trump has told him several times "in writing" that he wants Wax to take a role in his next administration, which is a generous – but not outlandish – interpretation of some of the messages he showed me.

Berger has his own pet project: collaborating with other far-right organizations abroad. The club has been linked – through visiting members, guest speakers, and the like – with Austria's Jugend Österreich (Freedom Youth of Austria), Germany's "Young AfD," Italy's Lega, and Hungary's Fidesz. Fidesz is the party of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, a political hero of many group members. He was the club's first international political endorsement; Ecuador's Nayib Bukele followed. (And when Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro lost his 2022 reelection bid, the group tweeted, then deleted, "send in the tanks," essentially signing off on Bolsonaro's supporters' Jan. 6-style coup attempt.)

[*Cont. from 71*] pears to have changed his worldview. In a brief, but insightful interview from the penitentiary with TMZ, Knight expressed surprise over the Davis arrest, declined to identify him or anyone, reminded his interviewer that the two had once played Pop Warner football together, and emphatically denied Anderson was the shooter. "I'm not going to take the stand and testify on somebody, for what?" Knight asked.

Special public defenders Charles Cano and Robert Arroyo, who represent Davis, declined to comment for this article, but wrote in a bail motion that the case was based on an "astounding amount of hearsay and speculative testimony" presented to the grand jury: "It cannot be said that the proof is evident and the presumption great that Duane is guilty of first-degree murder for the death of Shakur," they wrote. In a theme sure to be repeated throughout the trial, Cano and Arroyo argued, "The truthfulness of the content of the interviews was never verified. The book and interviews were done for entertainment purposes and to make money from a situation that Kading and others had already profited." In January, District Judge Carli Kierny set bail at $750,000 and ordered home confinement for Davis pending trial.

Dayvid Figler, a veteran defense attorney and former Las Vegas special public defender, concludes after reading the grand jury testimony that the defendant's public statements create a steep legal challenge. "The core of the case begins and theoretically ends with the various statements Duane Davis has made over the years," Figler says. "Those statements will always be admissible as evidence. Here you don't even have to rely on individuals who say that's what he told them. He did interviews that are recorded. He wrote a book and put it in his own words." Even the most capable defense team might have a hard time explaining away admissions Davis makes in his own memoir, such as, "I pulled the Glock … tossed it in the back seat. Bubble Up did the driving, Baby Lane and [Big Dre] were riding in the back." A short time later, Shakur's life was draining away in the shadow of the Strip.

Call it an extreme example of literary license, but Davis also attempts to claim something approaching self-defense. "Tupac made an erratic move and began to reach down beneath his seat," Davis writes. "It was the first and only time in my life that I could relate to the police command, 'Keep your hands where I can see them.' Instead, Pac pulled out a strap [handgun], and that's when the fireworks started. One of my guys from the back seat grabbed the Glock and started bustin' back." Mogg testified to the grand jury that there was no evidence that either Tupac or Knight had a weapon.

A portion of Kading's damning recording was also used in Dorsey's documentary. Around the time of Davis' recorded conversation with Kading and his partner, the LAPD was facing a wrongful death lawsuit filed by Biggie's family, alleging corrupt cops were behind the murder. (That litigation was eventually dismissed.) The LAPD named Knight as a possible suspect in the Biggie shooting, but he was never charged. In his interview with Kading, all Davis would say about the Biggie hit was, "That one wasn't us."

Davis' admissions aren't the only statements he's given to authorities – and his earlier claims may be a basis of his defense. In 1997, just months after Tupac's murder, Davis denied to the FBI his involvement in the shooting. Davis adhered to this dubious version of events for the next decade – until he was once again in trouble and, once again, was approached by investigators trying to solve the killing.

At its dark heart, however, this is a murder story. The spotlight is on Duane Davis. Prosecutors say he's a hardened gangster with hurt feelings because he believes he didn't get enough credit and cash for his role in killing the voice of a generation.

Like the cops who grew winded chasing him across three decades, Davis wrote a story. Now, he's on the brink of achieving where they failed, bringing a degree of closure to – how did he put it? – "the biggest crime in Las Vegas history." This legend in his own mind never stops spinning.

Slow down, Scarface. Las Vegas is the place that venerates its murderous gambling pioneers with a museum and offers tours of the homes and businesses of the infamous. A short distance from where Tupac died is the scene of the largest mass shooting in American history. Biggest crime? Get in line. Senseless bloodletting has plenty of competition here.

Riddled with dark alleys, corrupt elements, and conspiracies, the winding Tupac murder investigation remains a noir mystery for a new generation that still threatens to embarrass law enforcement. Despite Keffe D's admissions, the biggest challenge now facing police and prosecution might be in keeping the trial from tumbling down a rabbit hole of discovery littered with conflicting evidence.

But in the end, the question remains, "Why now?" Carroll, the retired bike cop, answers the question with a question as he speaks to the frustration of many of his colleagues. "It comes to a point where, how long are we all supposed to sit by and listen to this guy brag about committing a murder and not be charged with anything?"

But as the cop who arrested Davis told the aging gangster, "That's what court's for, right?"

At 2023's "CPAC Hungary," an offshoot of the U.S. conservative convention, Wax was a featured speaker, appearing on the rolls next to Gosar, failed Arizona gubernatorial candidate Kari Lake, Posobiec, Bannon, and former senator and presidential candidate Rick Santorum. Orbán spoke on the first day of the convention; the rest of the schedule had themes like "Local vs. Hiperglobal" and "No Country for Woke Men." Berger has formalized a partnership between the club and Hungary's Center for Fundamental Rights – the main sponsor of CPAC Hungary – and placed its executive director, Miklós Szánthó, on the NYYRC's board of advisers. The CFR invited the club to co-host a gala at CPAC Hungary; in return, the CFR is listed as a co-host of the NYYRC's gala. At the party, there is a smattering of other diplomats and academics from some of Europe's other far-right movements: It's clear there are plenty of MAGA junkies overseas looking for their next dealer.

"The populist right is on the upswing," Berger tells me, pointing to the success of Germany's far-right AfD and France's National Rally. "We believe these groups are going to be in power, adjacent to leadership … and we think it's a good idea to make friends and make connections and learn how they've achieved success. We're not trying to build something solely for export."

A WEEK OR SO AFTER THE GALA, I meet Berger and Burra at the clubhouse. It's a rainy morning, and we spend a few hours talking on the big leather couches. At one point, we're talking about Posobiec, who is on the board of advisers for the club. I sense an opportunity to get a little bit of truth here and go for it, delicately posing the question of how trolls like Posobiec – whose grift is even more obvious than most on the far right – serve their mission. Berger makes a joke about "promo code POSO" working well on mypillow.com – a wink and a nod to the fact that every far-right huckster is selling something (in Posobiec's case, a discount code to conspiracy theorist Mike Lindell's bedding emporium). But Burra leans in.

"I'll ask you this: What is power? To me, power is belief," he says. His voice gets a little softer. "And if you believe it … who am I to tell you otherwise?" His voice gets even softer. "And I support you, my fellow American" – he breaks off in giggles.

I chuckle along, because it seems like Burra is giving me a peek behind the curtain. "And if that belief then increases the power of the people that you're working for, then that's …" I say, but he breaks in.

"Oh, is that how it works? Oh, OK, yeah, I guess, sure," he whispers, grinning. "I'm happy to serve you, my people." Berger looks vaguely concerned. Burra has now fully committed to his Batman-villain impression. "We're going to give you the power back. We're going to return the power to the people of Gotham…." He starts giggling again.

"Look it's – I genuinely believe it," Burra says, sobering – *it* could mean anything, in this context. I think back to my conversation with him about how he thinks the 2020 election was stolen. "I've found a crew that also believes it," he says. "There are masses that believe it. Are we all wrong? Or is there some part of what we're talking about, so vigorously and vehemently and full of belief and emotion – is there even any part of that that you're willing to take seriously?"

He's partly right, when it comes down to it. It doesn't really matter if Burra, Berger, and Wax are committed to each policy position or political statement made by the bigots and lunatics they've associated with over the years. The "crew" Burra talks about is real. That crew shows up for parties. It shows up for rallies. And it's given many of the people involved with it a platform and political bona fides they didn't have before. Where they go from here is still up in the air. Wax is thinking about stepping down next year. But he says that if Trump loses, "the club's standing and my personal standing has been elevated to such a degree that I could stay involved politically in some capacity."

Burra says he's not sure if he'll go back to work for Bannon after Santos' office finally closes, or if he'll try something else – and if Trump wins, he certainly wouldn't turn down a job in the White House. "I'm pretty much always going to be with the club one way or another," he says.

It all comes back to a political lesson he says he learned from Bannon himself.

"It's about power," he says. "Anybody who tells you different, they're fucking lying to you."

SIN CITY AT 200 MPH

[*Cont. from 51*] It strikes me that if the Las Vegas Grand Prix is undergoing some version of this testing your limits, they've found them. They've made life miserable for locals, destroyed a car, got themselves sued by their own fans, and kept hundreds of thousands of people trapped in a labyrinth surrounded by $80 T-shirts and the Blue Man Group. Hunter S. Thompson could dream up nothing weirder. But to hear these European fans tell it: Good, now you know where you are. And where you are is Las Vegas.

THAT NIGHT the mood at the racetrack is more acutely excited than before. If the Las Vegas Grand Prix is, as Verstappen and others characterized it, all a show, then this is the big climax. The red carpet is out, and Ryan Reynolds, Rihanna, and A$AP Rocky roam the paddock. Bad Bunny makes a beeline for the hospitality suites. Shaquille O'Neal wanders around the pit lane trying to figure out how to get access to the starting grid. At a normal F1 race, there might be one A-lister who shows up and gets the ultimate VIP treatment: to hang out in the Red Bull or the Mercedes garage with the team. Here, there's a celebrity guest in every garage. The organizers distributed to media a list of celebrities in attendance that was 72 pages long, from *Jimmy Kimmel Live*'s Guillermo to Brad Pitt.

What really makes the atmosphere feel more electric on race day, though, are the fans. It's 10 p.m. and they arrived having already tied one on for the most part. The race reported a capacity crowd of 315,000 on track. And across town the surge in visitors is noted – for better and for worse. The concentration of tourists in the walled-off racing area along the Strip has kept people from venturing downtown. Plaza Hotel & Casino CEO Jonathan Jossel claimed on the *City Cast Las Vegas* podcast that the Plaza had one of the slowest weekends since Covid. Ross Mollison, producer of *Absinthe,* one of the top shows in town, wrote in an open letter that they suffered compared to the same weekend in past years. Other high-profile shows, from Penn & Teller to Barry Manilow, simply went dark for the weekend.

But at the high-end properties, it's a different story. The MGM is seeing its highest-grossing weekend ever. Stories circulate around the racetrack that the table-games dealers at the Cosmopolitan made more than $300,000 in tips the night before. And Wynn CEO Craig Billings said his company had more requests for credit and money wired to the cage than ever.

High rollers like these don't watch from a grandstand seat. They have access to the Bellagio's exclusive Fountain Club, where caviar and champagne flow for the 3,600 guests who forked over more than $11,000 per ticket. A woman named Devon from Woodlands, Texas, is one of those ticket holders, but she gave up her seat at Fountain Club and opted instead to watch the race from the Paddock Club Suite, which sits above the finish line. Here, too, a ticket affords you all the wagyu steak, lobster, and sushi your belly can fit. Fans like Devon huddle around space heaters outside and pull chairs along the terrace rail for the best views of the racetrack one could get.

Devon says her husband bought the tickets to entertain clients, but neither of them had ever watched Formula 1. They binged *Drive to Survive* to prepare. As they got more into the show, they got more excited about the race – and decided to use the tickets themselves. "We ended up bringing our family instead," she says. When I ask her where her husband is, she has no idea: "Probably down there with a driver or something." Ah, the good life.

When the lights go out and the race begins, there's a huge cheer, the uncorking of a year's worth of anticipation and anxiety in one moment. Nine months ago, it seemed an impossible feat of civic engineering and corporate muscle to make this race happen. Two nights ago, it felt as if it may all unravel. But now the cars are off, and there's nothing, not even the outcome of the race, left in doubt.

Almost immediately, perhaps because of a lack of tire grip from the cold late-night desert temperatures, or perhaps from an oil spill caused by an antique car brought onto the track before the race (more pageantry to fuck up the motorsport, naturally), the cars slip and slide along the first turn and nearly cause a pileup. Later, on lap three, Lando Norris loses control of his McLaren on turn 11 after hitting a bump in the track and careens into a wall at top speed. (He was taken to the hospital though unharmed.)

Going into the race, it was assumed everyone was competing for second place behind Verstappen, but after he forces Leclerc off the track in the first lap, Verstappen is given a five-second penalty. Then on the 25th lap, when Verstappen attempts to pass Mercedes' George Russell, the two collide, which brings a safety car onto the track and gives Sergio "Checo" Pérez the opportunity to pit and change tires, and maneuver himself into position to challenge for the win.

On the 32nd lap, Pérez uses his drag-reduction system, which is like a turbo button that F1 cars can only use on certain sections of the track. It helps Pérez rocket past Leclerc on turn 14 and take the lead, and the fans lose their ever-loving minds. "Checo number one!" It may have been the bet I placed on Checo to win earlier that day, or it may have been my cloyingly American need to see underdogs prevail, but I lose my mind along with them.

Among the fans cheering for Checo is David Woodley, who has also placed a bet on him to win. After describing his first night as a "shit show," Woodley's love for motorsports is rekindled anew tonight. "They give you champagne as you're walking in," he says. "Food was all free. I had four lobsters."

Woodley recalls his first Grand Prix, in Montreal, where at the end of the race, fans broke out their own bottles of champagne. "I was just in the normal stands," he says. "They started pouring it in glasses. I thought, 'That doesn't happen at NFL games.'" It felt like something too sophisticated to happen in America, but here he was toasting bubbly in Vegas.

I tell Woodley that I think this might be what really makes Las Vegas the right city for Formula 1. Nowhere else in the world does a better job of making everyone, no matter where they are on the social ladder, feel just a rung or two higher, even for only a moment. It may be smoke and mirrors, but so is Formula 1. "We call ourselves backpackers to billionaires," Liberty Media's Wilm tells me. "That's our fan base." It may have taken Vegas and F1 a long time to find each other, but Liberty seems to want to make it permanent: It signed a 10-year deal with the city and is already selling tickets for next year's race. Despite the stereotype of Formula 1 fans as champagne-sipping fancy pants, the truth is the petrolheads and car junkies are legion, without class or station. Champagne-sipping car junkies, but legion all the same.

By the time I arrive back at the paddock, Pérez has given the lead back to Leclerc. By lap 40, Leclerc gives the lead up to Verstappen, and everyone knows it's a race for second. Verstappen wins his record-setting 18th race this season, with only one more to go.

I wander back to the rear of the paddock area, where the garages for the bottom-tier teams sit across from the makeshift wedding chapel and casino. Down at that end, there's no press, no gawking fans or paparazzi, no hubbub to speak of. There's only crews for the also-ran teams, in jumpsuits and helmets, standing around watching the race on a big screen while they take smoke breaks. As the fates of their racers become clear, they extinguish their cigarettes, bid adieu to the Elvis impersonator who shared his lighter with them, and wander back to their garages. Another day at work, another curtain call.

As Verstappen crosses the finish line, where Justin Bieber waves the checkered flag, Verstappen sings "Viva Las Vegas." Perhaps he's having a laugh at the fans, perhaps with them. It doesn't matter. He's the unstoppable three-time world champion of racing. His team, Red Bull, had already won the Constructors' Championship, which comes with an estimated $140 million prize, not even enough to break even for the team's expenses this season. NASCAR, this is not. The rich get richer. The house always wins.

As Verstappen, Checo, and Leclerc make their way to the Bellagio for the podium celebration, fireworks erupt from high atop seven of the Strip's massive casino towers. On the roof of the Aria, 60 stories above, Jon Loreto, a large bald man about 40 years old, stands guard by one of the launch sites with a hose, spraying down the rubber roof in case anything goes awry. He's a pyrotechnic designer with the company Pyrotecnico, and one of the designers of this show – one of the biggest the company has ever done. Planning the show took months and required coordination between more than 50 people on the roofs of seven casinos. Each rooftop is its own operation, all happening in a tightly constrained area, and timed with the race. "You don't have a lot of room to make errors," Loreto says. "There's no second chances."

Ordinarily, he wouldn't travel with the crew to shows like this. He's from a small town in rural Pennsylvania, and before this trip he'd only once been on an airplane. "I don't even like to go to Philly," he tells me. Pyrotecnico's creative director, Rocco Vitale, invited Loreto along because he knew he loved F1.

On race day, one would think a seat on the roof of the Aria, 600 feet in the air, would beat Andy Austin's balcony or the Paddock Suite by a country mile. But instead of seeing his first live F1 race up close, Loreto watched it on his phone while listening to the cars roar by below. Up to this point, the experience had been simply overwhelming. "I don't know if Vegas is for me," he says. Formula 1, however, this sport of noblemen and aristocrats, makes sense to him. He didn't need to have a $17 million car or even a $2,500 ticket and all-you-can-eat lobster to understand what was cool about this sport. It wasn't the glitz and the glamour. It was the cars. The cars go really, really fast. The stakes were as high as the roof of the Aria. One mistake and your car could be a fireball. Do everything right, and you'll fly. It's high risk, high reward. And that, not the singers and dancers and movie stars, is the real show. The racing, for fans like Loreto anyway, delivered.

As the racing show finishes, and Pyrotecnico's show begins, Loreto is surrounded by explosions of colorful embers and sparks. When the crowd finishes its cheer, Loreto looks over the edge and takes in the city. "That was pretty spectacular," he says.

"I don't know if I fit in here. But if they do this race again, I'll come back."

[*Cont. from 63*] teners (a service that EMF says has succeeded in everything from guiding people through crises of faith to averting suicide attempts). Throckmorton pauses, his tone somewhere between exasperation and bemusement. "If you can keep yourself unaware of some of the things that I pointed out, you can enjoy it." He adds, "It spoiled it for me."

EVERY WEEKDAY AFTERNOON at three these days, DJ Mistress Carrie takes the mic at rock radio station the Pike in Worcester, a small city an hour west of Boston. It's a good gig, but her old Boston listeners can't hear it on their radios – the signal cuts out well beyond city limits on the Mass Turnpike. Sitting in her car outside her new workplace, though, she can easily pick up the massive K-LOVE signal that replaced WAAF. And just in case one station in the Boston area wasn't enough, EMF bought a second signal there in 2022, giving K-LOVE extra reach into the North Shore and Gloucester. Like the stations that replaced WAAF, it's just another unmanned transmitter, rebroadcasting the same bland Christian rock from California and spreading its conservative pop-culture alternative even farther.

Today, the Educational Media Foundation is everywhere. You can hear it on the air from New York to San Francisco, or tune in on the K-LOVE and Air1 apps. Starting at $1,148, you can join the K-LOVE Friends and Family Cruise. The company had a growth spurt during the pandemic, taking advantage of the advertising decline that hit commercial radio stations. Last year, EMF bought out stations in Memphis, Buffalo, Atlantic City, and dozens of other cities across the country. EMF gives even the biggest for-profit media conglomerates a run for their money: Just a handful of years ago, it bought six big city stations from Cumulus – the country's third-largest station holder – for $103.5 million.

And true community broadcasters have even less of a chance in the face of EMF's buying sprees – especially when the billion-dollar organization can offer iHeart-level prices for neighborhood stations.

Even as the media industry has grown increasingly consolidated, the FCC has held onto one major policy to give small broadcasters a ghost of a chance, and to keep any one company from having too much sway over the public: To this day, it is illegal for a single company to own more than five AM or five FM stations in any one city. But there's a catch, says engineer and local-radio advocate Urick, a "loophole for noncommercial broadcasters": The FCC never applied this ownership cap to nonprofits. It also doesn't count translators, the meat of EMF's explosive growth, toward those totals. "In the San Jose area," Urick tells me, "they're on eight (FM) frequencies."

Today, a small number of community-media activists are still asking the FCC to limit the number of translators a single company could own, or to cap the number of frequencies a nonprofit can occupy in a single city, as it does with for-profits. But with the agency focused on things like internet access and digital privacy, radio – despite still being listened to by more than four of every five Americans every week – often gets overlooked. And EMF doesn't appear to be raising eyebrows at the commission; it has no flashy violations, no big lawsuits. To Urick, it feels like a David-versus-Goliath fight, but Goliath keeps winning.

Those in the CCM industry know that the genre is a punchline for most Americans. And many people I spoke with told me that this may work to EMF's advantage: That the organization evades scrutiny with the help of an intentionally prosaic facade, cloaking its money-stacking, culture-flattening project in banality. And this is nothing new for the group: When Fogal first incorporated the organization, it was called "Christian Media Ministries." But before the first station launched, Fogal met with an attorney who helped churches to navigate the turbulent waters of the FCC. The attorney suggested that he change the organization's name to the Educational Media Foundation. Fogal would say later that he felt the name was "bland and boring." But the attorney, Fogal recalled, "said that was actually a good thing." If the country's second-largest radio-station owner was still named Christian Media Ministries, perhaps others would have taken notice.

Leah Payne warns critics against mistaking kitsch for a lack of importance and influence. The politicking and legislation of the religious right, she says, is the tip of the iceberg. Beneath it is a whole culture that includes not just politics, but entertainment, arts, and music. Those who hold the CCM cards are wielding conservatives' soft power. "If we're not attentive to them," Payne says of those shaping the industry, "we're going to miss out on a lot."

But for now, EMF and the Christian-rock industry, it seems, are happy to be a joke if it keeps scrutinizing eyes off them. "The public just doesn't really care what they're doing," says Urick.

Keep letting Christian rock be nothing more than a punchline. The Educational Media Foundation, it seems, thanks you.

Chloë Sevigny

On working with Ryan Murphy, mean writers, and parenthood

The tagline for *Feud: Capote vs. The Swans* is "The Original Housewives." Do you watch any *Real Housewives*?
I have never watched a single episode of a single *Housewife*. I don't know who any of them are.

As an actor, what's it like to play in the Ryan Murphy pond?

'Feud: Capote vs. The Swans' airs Wednesdays at 10 p.m. on FX.

He's so prolific. I remember when I was first offered *American Horror Story*, it was still Facebook-y days, and I looked it up and saw that all my old alternative weirdo friends were into the show. I was like, "OK, this feels right."

In the show, the Swans meet for regular gossipy lunches. Do you have any regular routines with your girlfriends?
I used to have these girls' nights where I'd only have girlfriends over and we'd drink martinis and talk shit, but that hasn't happened as much now that the small person is always around my house and never leaves [*laughs*]. One of my New Year's resolutions was to start carving out more time for friends.

Your Jay McInerney *New Yorker* profile will turn 30 this fall. How do you feel about it?
It was so odd to be written about before you were even famous for anything, you know? That was the hard part about it for me: I didn't really understand why it was happening. In retrospect, I can, and I think it's interesting to follow a girl who's coming into her own, but at the time, I didn't feel it was justified. I was like, "Why am I even doing this?" [McInerney] promised to buy me this dress, and my father read *The New Yorker*.

This season of *Feud* is all about Truman Capote writing scandalous, exaggerated things about his female friends. Has anyone ever written anything particularly egregious about you?
There was someone who used to write for the [*New York Times*] Styles section, Bob Morris. It was very hurtful, and he wrote some really ugly things. I still think about it. He was like, "She's not that attractive, she's not that smart, and she's not that good at acting." When you're 20 years old and you read that, you're like, "Huh?!"

You had your baby at 45 in May 2020, at the height of the pandemic. What was that like?
It's amazing just to have a baby. I didn't think it was going to happen for me, and then to have this thing ... I can't imagine life without him. And like I said, he just never leaves. He's always around here. I had tried other avenues and not had luck with them, so to naturally conceive at that age is kind of a miracle.

What's the best advice you've ever received?
I don't really have an answer for that. I think there are things you learn as you go along, like comparing and despairing and how unhealthy that is, and running your own race. They're all truisms but feel trite to say out loud, so I'm always kind of "Ugh."

What style advice would you give people?
Style is so personal. There are people that say "Less is more," but I don't know if that's necessarily true. I think whatever is true for you and makes you feel best.

Do you have favorite films that you've been in? There are so many good ones.
I like the impact that *Gummo* has had on young people. That makes people think differently about movies. It might not be my favorite performance, per se. Also, *Boys Don't Cry*, in terms of the social impact that it had. It's so rare to do something that's so moving, eye-opening, and hopefully changes people's consciousness.

How do you feel about the state of New York City? It's increasingly a city for the rich.
Yeah. The athleisure and the dogs are taking over. Everybody's in Lululemon and has a fucking dog, and it's driving me crazy. I'm sorry, dog lovers. There are too many of you. I'm not going out to clubs in Ridgewood, so I'm sure it's there somewhere. I hope there are [cool] places for people to go when they want to.

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